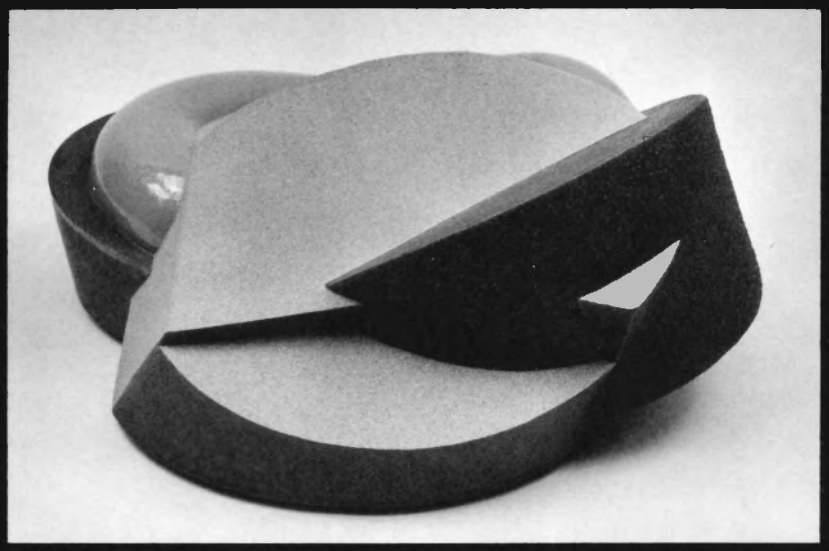
AMERICAN CERAMICS 3/4

# ANNE CURRIER

MARCH 2 — MARCH 30, 1985



# WAYNE HIGBY

"BAY CLIFFS MESA" 1984 COLLECTION: MR. & MRS. GROTTA

Represented by Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia

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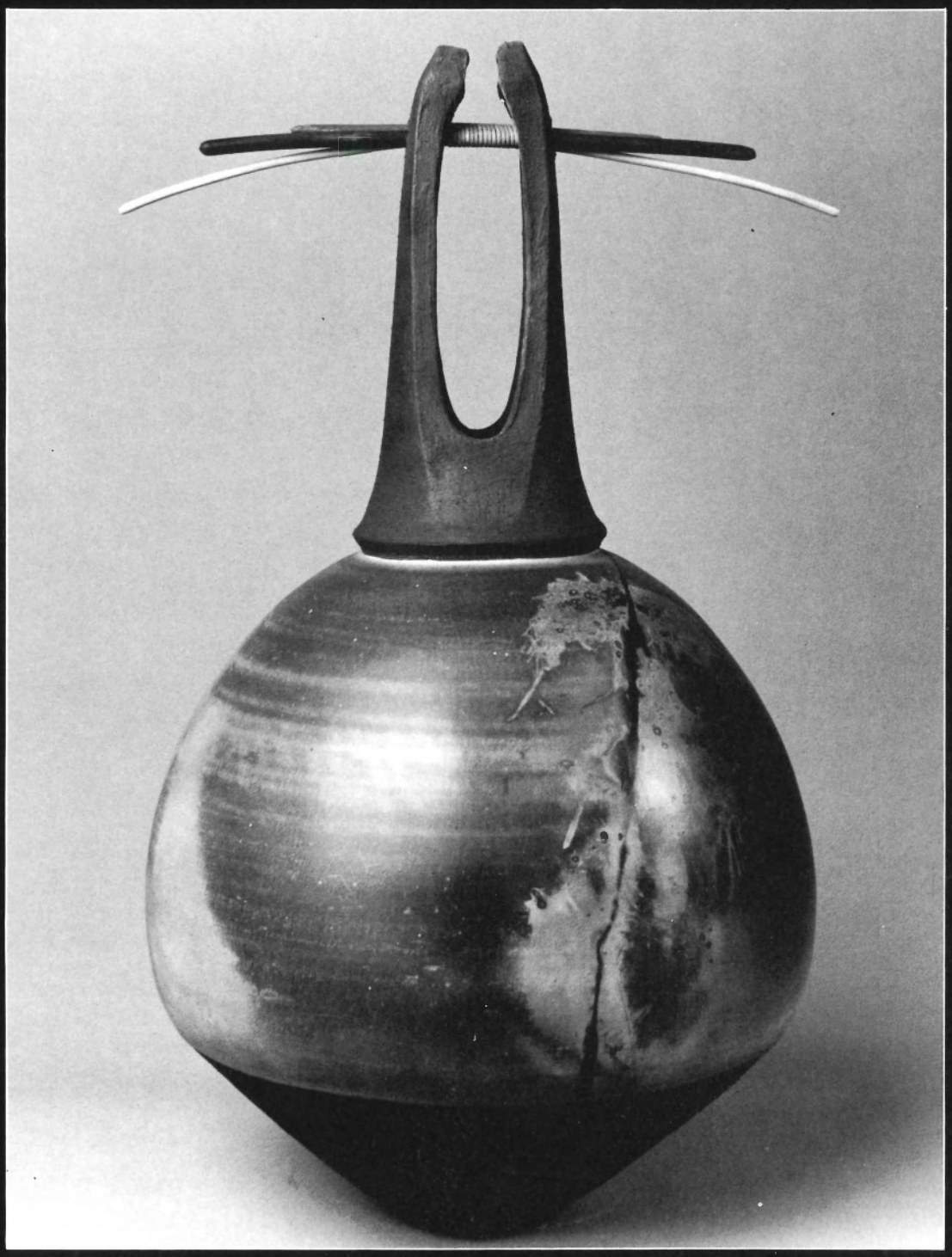
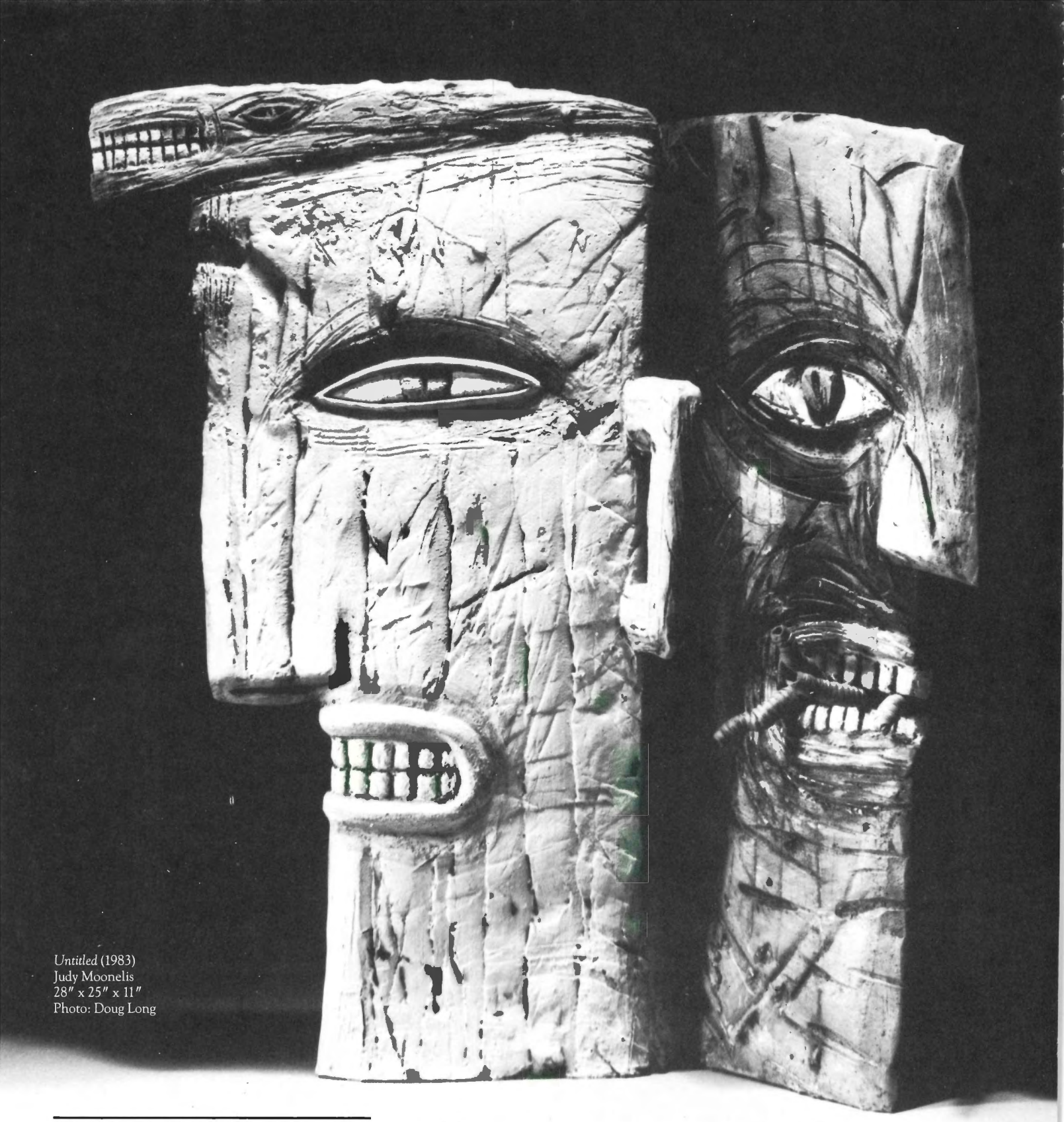


Chris Richard
"Caned Sphere"
28″ H × 16″ D



*Untitled* (1983)
Judy Moonelis
28″ x 25″ x 11″
Photo: Doug Long

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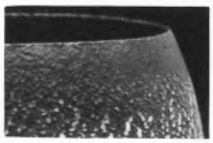
*(Cover) Left to right, vessels by John Gill:* Untitled *(1977), 15" (38 cm), earthenware. Collection Daniel Jacobs, New York.* Untitled *(1984), 22 1/4" (56.5 cm) high, stoneware. Collection Hope and Jay Yampol, New York.* Wine Ewer *(1982), 16" (40.6 cm) high, stoneware. Private Collection. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, New York. Photo: Brad Guice.*

CHRONICLE



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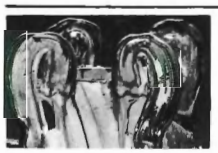

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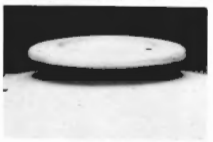

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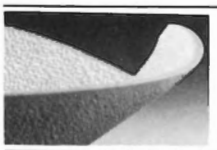

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# Contemporary Ceramics

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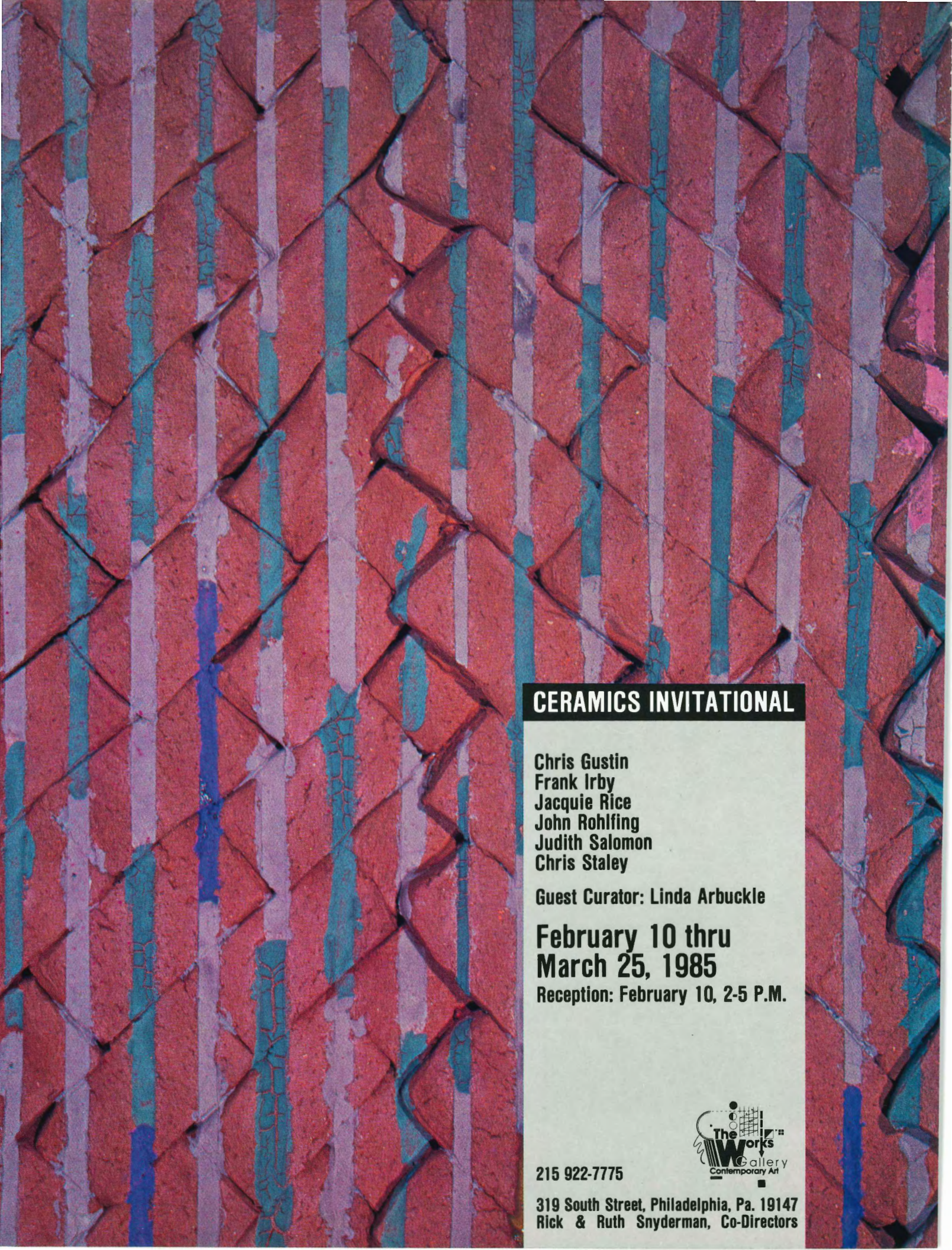

# CERAMICS INVITATIONAL

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Frank Irby
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Judith Salomon
Chris Staley

Guest Curator: Linda Arbuckle

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Funded by Pewabic Pottery and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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(313) 822-0954

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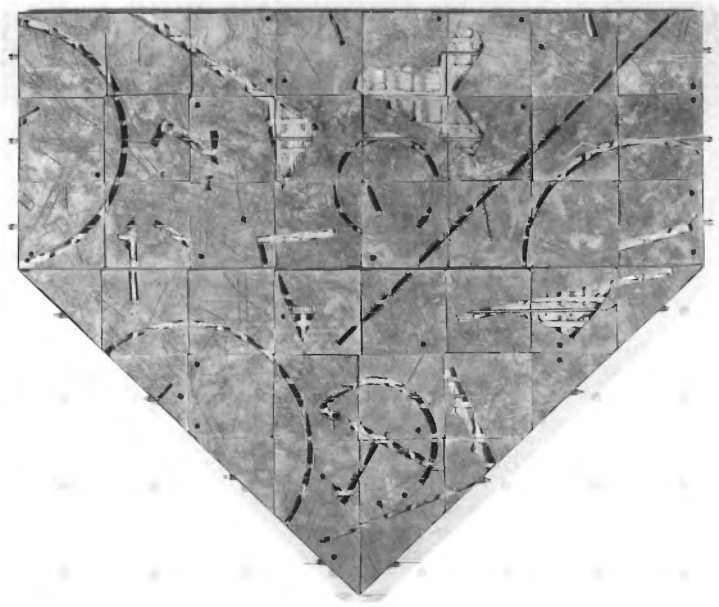

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Saturday 11–3

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# Paul Chaleff

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March 4-27

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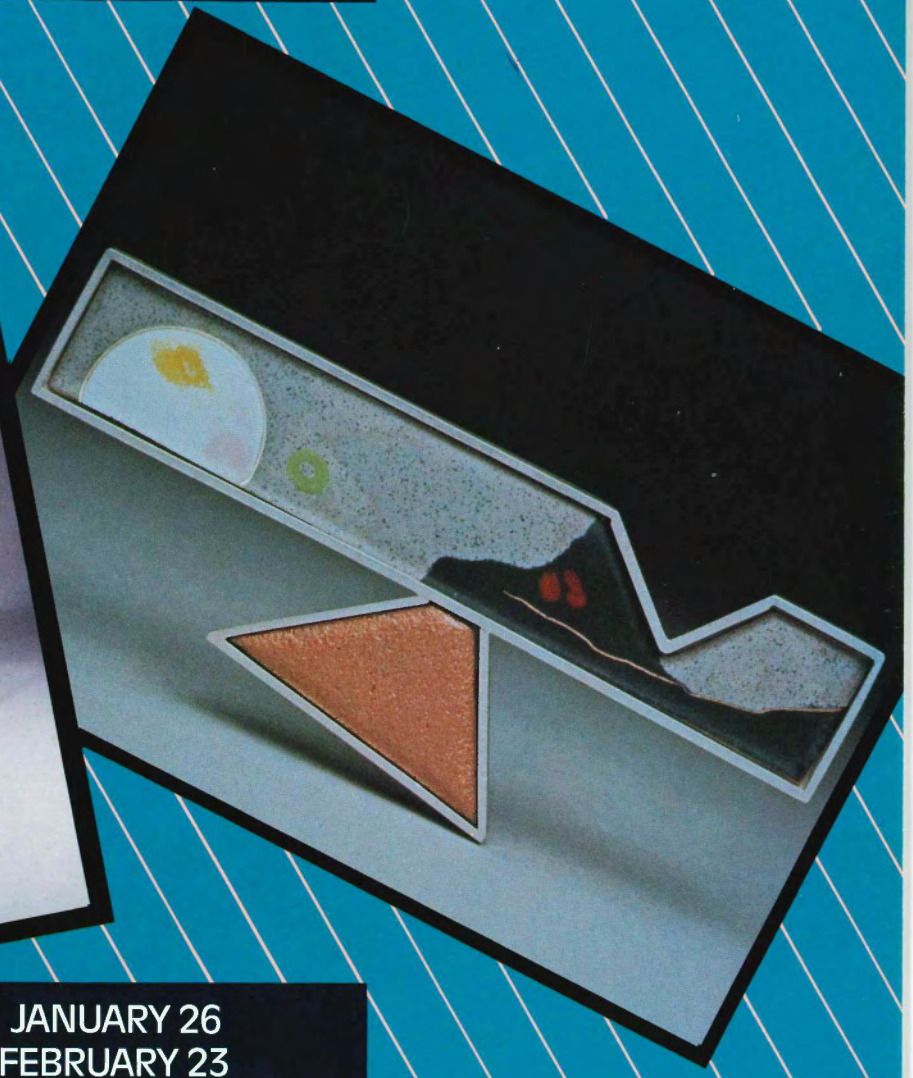
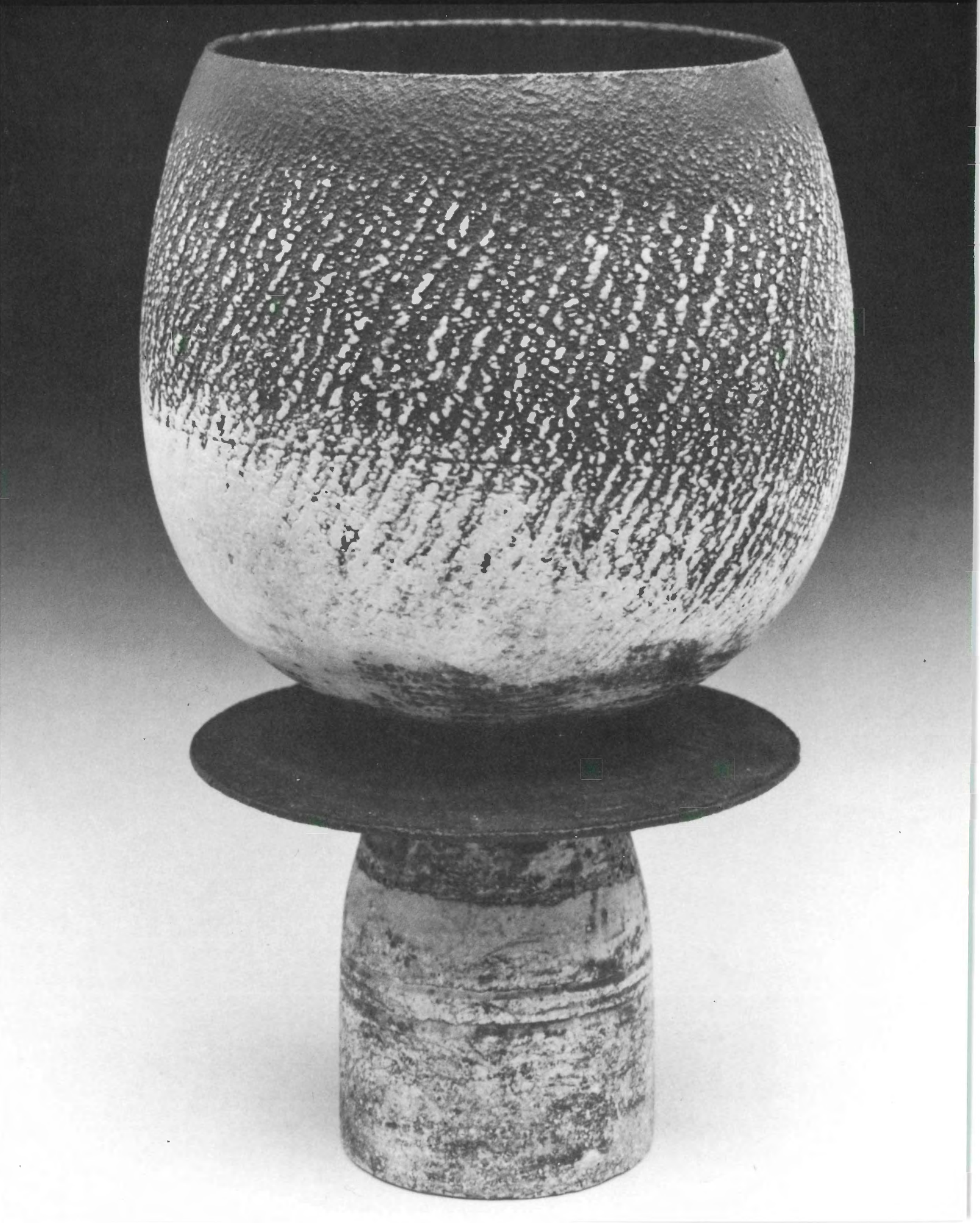


JANUARY 26
FEBRUARY 23

ALPHONSE MATTIA
VALETS

JAMIE BENNETT
JEWELRY



# *In Search of Form*
## *Hans Coper and Lucie Rie*

*Michael Dunas and Sarah Bodine*

With the major retrospective exhibitions of Hans Coper (1920–1981) and Lucie Rie (1902– ) attention is once again focused on Britain's two most influential and seminal figures in modern ceramic history.[1] The Olympian position of Coper and Rie, as well as Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew, remains unchallenged in the stolid British temperament, despite the pluralistic anxiety of the current artistic climate. Leach's unparalleled achievement in liberating British pottery from perceptual and conceptual academicism has long held statutory claim on pottery's philosophical heritage. But with current work dissolving tradition-bound forms and paralleling expression in other art media, revisionist historians search for an aesthetic apotheosis as precedent for the modern movement in ceramics. Consequently, the Coper/Rie axis has been steadily gaining in influence, as aesthetic issues pertaining to their work have grown in importance for the contemporary potter. The break with the Leach paradigm of the Country Potter and the Unknown Craftsman, and the affirmation of the European modernism of Coper and Rie, have had minor repercussions on the eclecticism of postwar American ceramics. Yet, the formal evidence of this fracture is of utmost consequence to the notion of pottery as an independent art form and thus affects the language and meaning of contemporary ceramic expression.

Coper and Rie's contribution to ceramic history lies beyond the biographical exegesis of such studies as John Houston's *Lucie Rie* of 1981, George Wingfield Digby's introduction to Rie's 1967 retrospective, and Tony Birks's 1983 monograph on Coper.[2] A critical approach, which incorporates formal, contemplative, and expressive considerations, would posit Coper and Rie more firmly within the framework of modern aesthetics. Their work has been characterized as European, Modern, sculptural, architectural, and primitivistic. While broad and amorphous, these categorizations imply an underlying commonality between modern ceramics and other twentieth-century art movements.

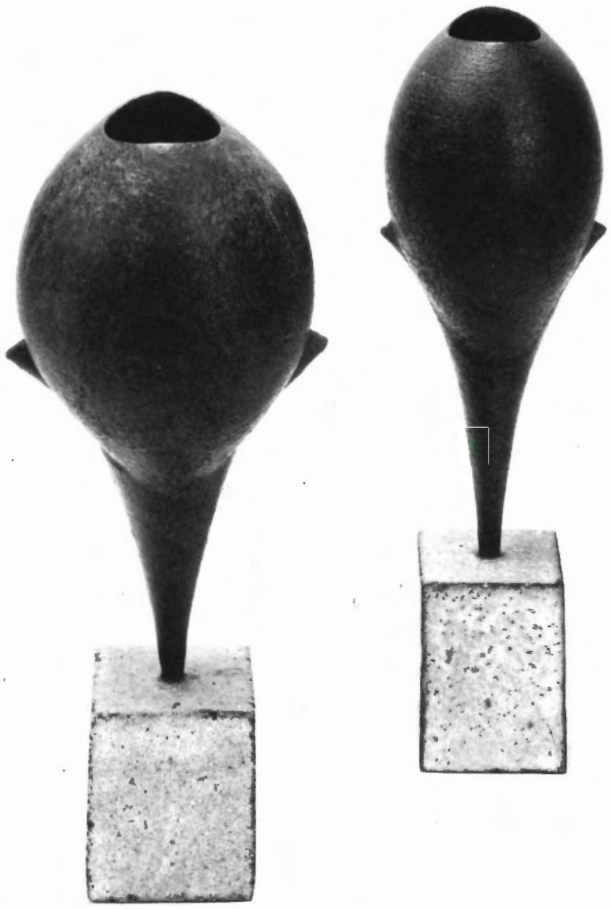
Modern art movements such as Cubism, Futurism, and Suprematism emerged in European capitals, from Paris and Milan to Vienna and Moscow, and were led by a new breed of urban artists—artists who denied the human condition and glorified the power of mechanical energy, who analyzed the estrangement of humanity through perceptual alienation, and who reflected the loss of self in the urban environment through abstracting pure sensation. Characteristic of these revolutionary movements was a break from traditional artistic representation and association and a move to self-defined, self-referential systems, where forms were rendered in a reductive language of line, plane, and flat expanses of pure color.

The move to exorcise the applied arts of ornament and sylized shape was evident in a shift from the curvaceous, flowing lines of Art Nouveau and *Jugendstil* to the abstract, more geometric forms of Austrian Secession artists such as Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser, who established the Wiener Werkstätte, an arts and crafts cooperative, for the production of "new" domestic art for contemporary society.[3] In ceramics, the move to simpler, more geometric, "modern" shapes was slow in evolving, however. The Wiener Keramik-Werkstätte, founded in 1905 by Bertold Löffler and Michael Powolny, contributed ceramic decorations and tiles to Wiener Werkstätte interiors, but its best-known products remain Powolny's renowned decorative majolica objects.

In the early 1920s, Lucie Rie enrolled in Vienna's Kunstgewerbeschüle. Her ceramics teacher was the same Michael Powolny, from whom she acquired technical knowledge while avoiding the stylistic affectations of the period. She remembers her aims to be simple: "to make pottery articles for domestic use that would fit in with the best interiors and the best artifacts."[4] The interiors she had in mind were those of Hoffmann's Palais Stoclet, built between 1905 and 1911, heralded for its denial of structure, mass, and historical references to architecture.

Rie's pots of the thirties were as anticeramic as Hoffmann's building was atectonic. Influenced by the new "functionalism," and in an effort to expunge the "peasant quality" of Wiener Werkstätte ceramics, she produced abstract yet prosaic forms such as cylinders and wide-mouthed bowls. Unlike the sturdy peasant wares of

Untitled *(1965–70) by Hans Coper, 5 1/2" (14 cm) high, stoneware. Collection Daniel Jacobs, New York. Photo: Eric Shambroom.*



*Two Cycladic forms (1975–76) by Hans Coper, tallest 8 1/2" (22 cm) high. Collection Jane Coper (left) and Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts (right). Photo: Jane Coper.*

*Combined form (1970) by Hans Coper, 12 1/2" (32 cm) high. Collection W. Ismay. Photo: Jane Coper.*



European tradition, these forms were tightly thrown, very thin, delicate, and seemingly weightless. Her experiments, however, found no ready audience. None sold at the Wiener Werkstätte gallery, and on a 1937 trip to London, both galleries and studio potters rejected her "modern" ceramics as too thin, weak-footed, and fussily finished.

Hans Coper's roots can also be traced to bourgeois European urbanism. The son of a German Jewish manager of a small textile mill, Coper was exposed to the urban ills of Europe at mid-century: debilitating factory conditions, religious persecution, transience, and, as war approached, mass emigrations. Upon arriving in England in 1939 at the age of nineteen, he found himself not only homeless, without family or possessions, but also forced to shed his cultural and social heritage in order to survive. He was isolated and eventually sent to internment camps with other German refugees, in England and later in Canada. Ironically, it was in these camps that Coper formed friendships with men who introduced him to the rudiments of draftsmanship as well as the freedoms of modern art. Coper went to work for Lucie Rie after the war, in the late forties, at the pottery studio she had established in London only a year and a half after emigrating from Austria. Providing the framework for their artistic collaboration were a number of affinities: their European backgrounds, their struggle with alienation, a concurrent search for anonymity within an urban environment, and a predilection for an austere aesthetic. Their joint tableware production of the early fifties reflects modernist ideas, which even at that late date were in strong contrast to the work of their British contemporaries. This can be readily seen in a comparison of shape and decoration. Coper and Rie's forms are highly controlled, precise, geometric, and abstract, as opposed to the more traditional, loosely thrown bottle or jug shapes found in England. Similarly, Coper and Rie's work denies ornamentation in favor of subtle enhancements of shape through both highly articulated sgraffito and a limited, neutral color range, as opposed to pottery being treated as a canvas for applied, pictorial, flowing decorative brushwork.

The influence of primitive art was pervasive in the work of both Rie and Coper since their earliest collaboration. The reductivist aesthetic of formal simplicity and the use of abstract decoration to articulate the form of the pot characterizes their ceramic vocabulary from the fifties onward. For Coper, who grew up with little exposure to studio ceramics, Egyptian and Cycladic sculpture as well as the abstract primitivism of Arp and Brancusi (both of whom were at the height of their careers) had greater influence than the dominating Leach philosophy of Oriental humility and spiritualism. There could be no more modern direction at this time than Coper's. Where Leach sought meaning in studio pottery through its communal associations, Coper sought personal meaning in the "universal" forms of all cultures.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, abstract artists in all media were also seeking empathy with primitive artifacts, which were seen as timeless, intuitive, and self-contained. Unsigned, undated, they appeared as manifestations of pure emotion. A treasured predynastic Egyptian pot, roughly egg-shaped, was once described by Coper as a "humble, passive, somehow absurd object." Seeming at one with the maker, the primitive object dissolves into essence, pure expression, unaffected by ego.

Herbert Read once said that pottery is the most abstract of arts. Representative of nothing, it is what it is. Man, as *homo faber*, discovers irreducible elements of meaning—whether the sounds of music, the numbers of mathematics, or the forms of plastic expression—with which he constructs a vocabulary of artistic expression. In this light, it is not surprising that Coper abandoned his sculptural work in later years to concentrate on the primary form of the vessel.

Likewise, the innocent, personal expression of Lucie Rie's forms is unencumbered by the restrictions of the vessel metaphor—a conclusion we draw from Roger Fry's investigations of primitive art. Fry postulated that natural forms were used by primitive (and modern) artists to stir our emotions, that they presented their objects in such a manner that the forms themselves generate

emotional states in us, triggered by fundamental physiological mechanisms. Surprisingly, Fry did not make the further conclusion that people are moved by forms themselves, both natural and manmade. Considered as a primal manmade form, then, the vessel becomes a means of immediate cognition, of one-to-one communication, a "rightness" of expression that in the past has often been confused with rightness of utility.

The persistent attraction of primitive art for contemporary artists lies in its personification of pure form. Whether as a basis for iconographic studies or the current movement toward the intrinsic language of morphology, there has been a recurrence of ontological clues in the propogation of forms. Despite its negligible reference to time, place, or context, artists continue to pursue the investigation of primitive art because these forms hold their attention, visually and intellectually. As Dore Ashton has noted:

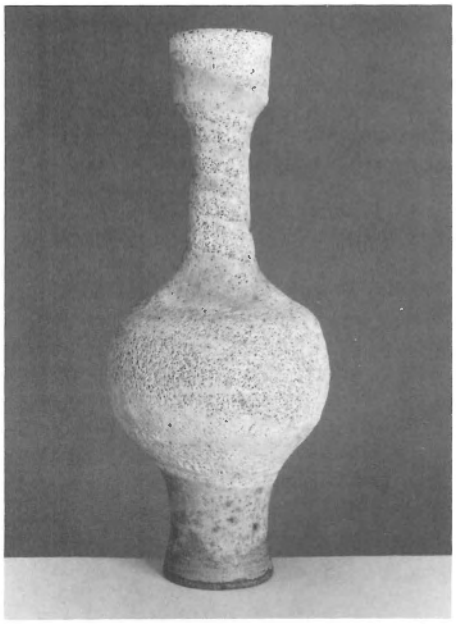
*There are a number of basic forms persistently projected by human hands. In many geometric or curvilinear shapes there seem to be intrinsic aesthetic values which are carried along in human consciousness and which never disappear no matter how often fashions in "seeing" shift.*[5]

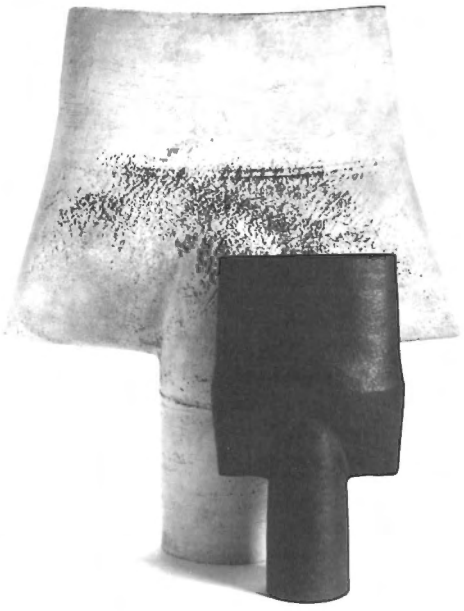
The origins of form can be traced to tools. Neolithic man observing shapes and materials in nature ascertained their discrete meaning in utility, thus fashioning the first tool. The next stage in the evolutionary process saw man refining forms according to intellectual and sensible *design*. Finally, man transcended the making of forms for utility, and thus the notion of art arose.

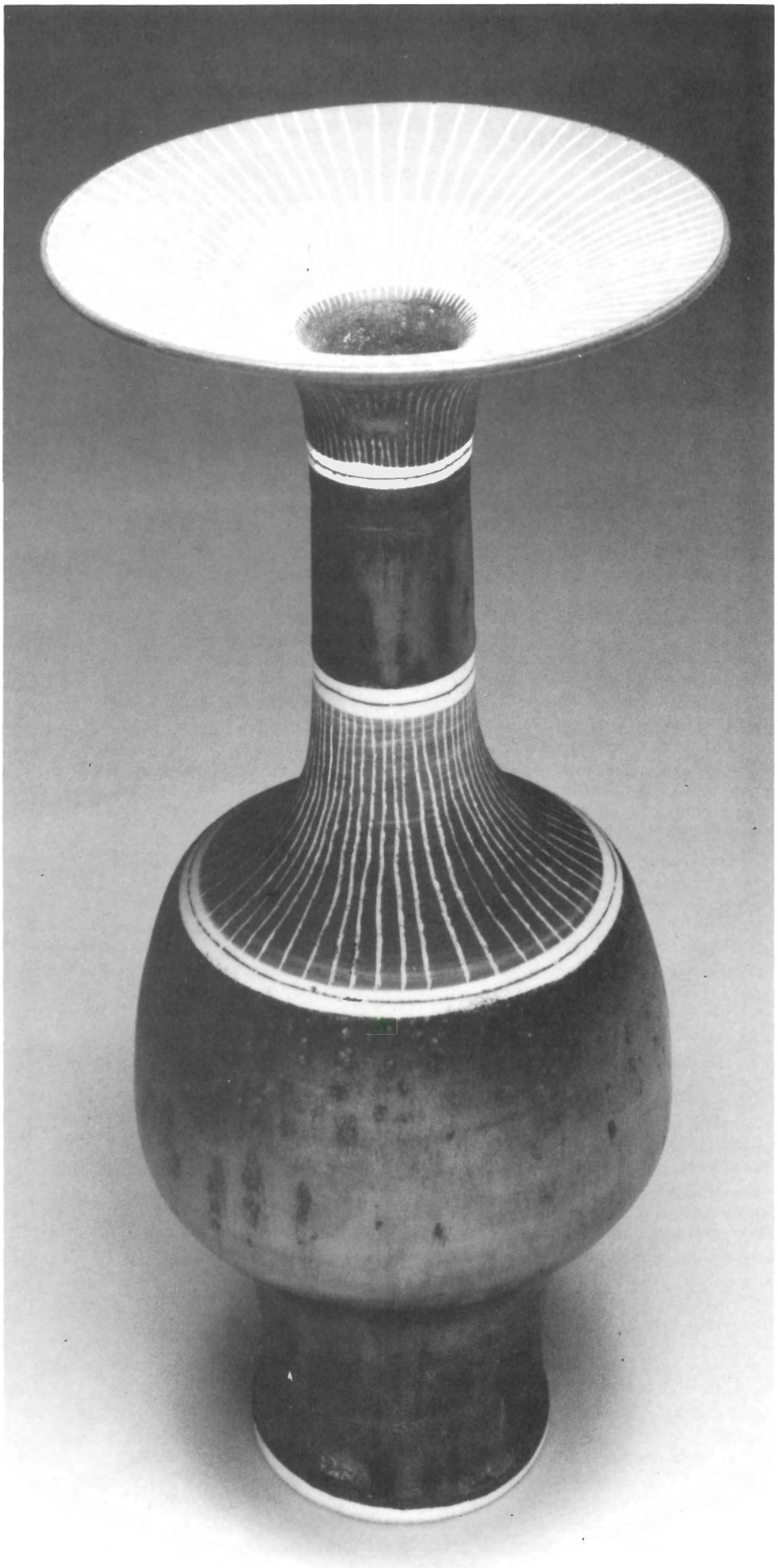
As early as 1927, Franz Boas was explaining the interrelationship of form and "making" in primitive art. Following the lead of Alois Reigl, who ascertained that the will to reproduce an aesthetic result is the essence of artistic work, Boas found that the will was bound up in the intuitive feeling for form, that will develops to higher levels as the expertise of manufacture develops. Even in nature, where formal properties of symmetry and rhythm do exist, form that impresses itself on the mind is a result of the "working" of natural things with imagination and technical expertise. He concludes that a "fundmental, aesthetic, formal interest is essential, and also that art, in its simple forms, is not necessarily expressive of purposive action but is rather based upon our reactions to forms that develop through mastery of technique."[6] In other words, in "making," man abstracts formal properties of nature; in "working" he defines, articulates, and makes real these properties. His technical expertise is the physical manifestation of this process, just as imagination is the mental one.

In order to explore the place of Coper and Rie in the history of form, the vessel, and modernism, we must expand on a few important facets of this philosophical construct. George Kubler, in *The Shape of Time*, resurrects the importance of form by attempting to bridge the existential gap between existence and essence. By reconstructing the history of things, he hopes to find a unified theory of meaning posited in form, synonymous with expression. The importance of a unified theory would be to establish the commonality of all things, whether ceramic or sculptural, in which the philosophical underpinnings would permit an evolving history of expression with a common language and common resolve. This most modern of attempts at a unified theory begins to explain why artists of various disciplines—sculpture, ceramics, architecture, and decorative arts—immediately apprehend forms such as those of Coper and Rie.

Kubler's "things" appear in series and, like tools and inventions, they are purposeful solutions to problems. These solutions, a certain class of forms, reveal themselves in temporal sequences. The central, controversial, and most original element of the notion of "things" is the theory of prime objects—inventions possessing prime traits. (Prime traits are the conjunctive properties that link prime objects, such as the Parthenon, to primal forms, which are indiscernable, yet intuitively acknowledged.) Since primal forms cannot be directly identified, they appear as recurring reactions and attempted solutions. In this regard, the vessel, through sheer duration, is an object that has proposed solutions and created reactions from the









Untitled *(1984) by Lucie Rie, 13" (33 cm) high, stoneware. Courtesy Westminster Gallery, Boston. Photo: Joel Degen.*

*Two spade forms (1970) by Hans Coper, tallest 14" (35.6 cm) high. Collection Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts (white form) and Jane Coper (black form). Photo: Jane Coper.*

Untitled *(1982) by Lucie Rie, 10" (25.4 cm) high, porcelain. Collection Daniel Jacobs, New York. Photo: Eric Shambroom.*

time of the first *Ur*-pot (a lump of clay with a hole pressed into it) up to the present.

This positivistic approach to epistemology—establishing the origin of truth in an a priori knowledge of forms, yet revealing its characteristics in the invention and replication of things—is an essential ingredient in the aesthetic dogma of the Modern Movement in art and architecture. The traditional historian's preoccupation with style, using the biological analogy of birth, maturation, and death, has been supplanted by the modern notion of systems, such as Suprematism and structuralism, which has taken the form of semiotics in literature, purity in architecture, abstraction in painting, and atonality in music, for example. This break with traditional modes of interpretation characterizes the Modern and can be seen in the break in pottery tradition signalled by the appearance of Coper and Rie's pots.

Kubler talks of the "good entrance" of an artist in a sequence—the appearance of being in the right place at the right time. In the 1950s, the pot form was in the grip of several style conventions, such as Oriental or Anglo-Saxon folk ware. But Coper and Rie, being outside this tradition, were able to approach the pot, the prime object, directly.

Of the limited repertoire of shapes employed by Coper, those that most clearly exhibit primitive influences are his Cycladic forms of 1975–76. The ancient Cycladic burial idols that most fascinated him were diminutive female forms in marble composed of geometric shapes: an oval head with a protruding, rectangular nose; an elongated, tubular neck; a trapezoidal torso on which the arms are crossed; broad, triangular flanks; and thin, parallel legs. Among these idols there appears a more abstracted violin shape that leads us directly to the Coper forms of 1974–76. These undoubtedly female forms have very long necks and no head, the torso is accentuated by a narrow waist and, most significantly, the flanks and legs take the shape of the heavy, rounded belly of a pot form. Although simplified and abstract, these figures are more charged with the power and sexuality of fertility.

Coper redefines the near abstraction of the violins in his own Cycladic pots: the neck asserts itself defiantly as it spirals toward the vertex; the body, which Coper has trimmed of the "fat" of the female form, is now a tightly controlled cylinder; the tapering tube of the flanks and legs echo the neck in an effort to accentuate the compact yet acutely geometric torso. Coper's Cycladic pots are a modern abstraction of a universal idea of fertility, less referential yet evoking similar qualities of sensuousness and fecundity. The tripartite construction, where the elongated neck is of the same length as the trunk, suggests anthropomorphism without detailing. Overall, the forms are unified compositions—employing space, light, volume, and movement—taken to the limits of their visual and visceral balance.

The painstaking precision that produces such seemingly effortless results, the masterful flow of the bowed and bulging profile, the slight slump or raising of the shoulders—all these make Coper's universal forms highly individualized. Not stylized as were the ancient Cycladic figures, but lyrical and expressive, Coper's work gives us the abstracted essence of the figure, not the referential abstraction.

Such three-dimensional forms lend themselves to sculptural description. As Robert Smithson has suggested, "Sculpture is not iconography. Its power to suggest space and time is inaccessible to ordinary meaning by being self-referential, absolute, primal."[7] Pottery conveys this sculptural expression in its formal concerns of volume, mass, light, and surface, its interplay of depressions and protruberances, and its rhythmical articulation of planes and contours. But most importantly, it is *touch* that unites pottery and sculpture. "Sculpture must invite us to handle it as an object," said Matisse, "just as the sculptor must feel in making it, the particular demands for volume and mass."[8] It is the synthesis of formal concerns that unites pottery and sculpture, as it is the force of sculptural expression that unites Coper with the modern masters, Giacometti, Arp, and, especially, Brancusi.

In addition to the biographical similarities with Brancusi—monkish, reclusive, introverted, Germanic—Coper produced work that exhibits similar contemplative and formal concerns. Brancusi, in his quest for absolutes, for the essence and not the appearance, relied heavily on ideas rather than on form. His interest in primitive sculpture was an attempt to achieve that sudden cognition, that revelation, that rightness of expression we sense in Coper's pots. Brancusi's early *Sleeping Muse* (1909) and the mature *Bird in Space* (1940) and Coper's early composite disc pots of the fifties and his last, delicate Cycladic forms of the seventies all deal with the simplest of sculptural concepts: clarification of line with minimal gesture and distillation of form to primary elements, unencumbered by detail.

What differentiates the later achievement of Coper from that of Brancusi is Coper's approach to artistic economy. Brancusi constantly struggled to wrest an image from recalcitrant material, whether marble, stone, or wood. There is an appearance and feeling of struggle in his work, a paring down both physically and intellectually to reach essence of meaning. Coper, on the other hand, constructed with a pliant, yielding material. There appears to be a natural growth, a nurturing of form, through the working of the clay.

Much must also be attributed to Coper's decision to remain with the vessel form and with clay. For Brancusi, "love of material" meant being true to structural properties, being comfortable with the material, not allowing it to get in the way of expression. His ultimate invention of gleaming surfaces was an attempt to ward off the natural contingency of light. Coper, on the other hand, approached material in an evolutionary, organic way, condensing the natural processes of life and spirit into form. Arp's comments about his own "Concretions" might serve as a description of this process. Arp, an artist much admired by Coper, described the sculptural process as "hardening, coagulating, thickening, growing together, solidification of mass—curdling of the earth and heavenly bodies."[9] Coper's surfaces are unlike Brancusi's in that the slip-covered and burnished treatment given to all his pots reflects both an irregular, stony quality and often produces all-black pots, absorbent rather than reflective of light, suggestive of the hollow blackness of the soul, as well as the elusive black interior of the pot itself.

One further illustration of Coper's organic approach to abstract sculpture is his concern with the pedestal and base. Brancusi and many other modern sculptors felt that the base, however essential to the stability or instability of the construction, was an intrusion and detraction from the form. Coper's bases, on the other hand, are organic in the sense that the pot seems to grow out of it, emerging from the primordial mass. Particularly in Coper's Cycladic forms, the bases are cylinders—the most stable, elemental pottery shape, which creates an abstract yet natural plinth. The pots would look unfinished without them. (Cycladic figures needed no such support, as they were usually laid horizontally on the burial mound.) A foot or plinth being a natural component of the vessel form is not only the result of the throwing process, but of the conceptual orientation of space and mass in context. That is, the foot not only balances the composition of the pot, but provides a relationship with its site or natural "pedestal."

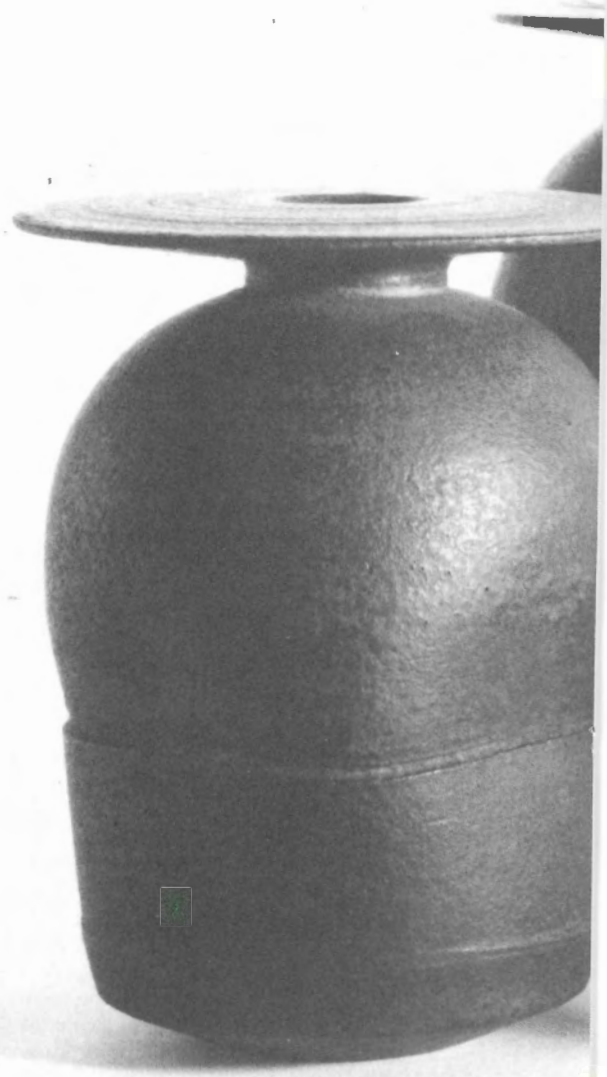
The calm austerity and rightness of expression that the abstract sculpture of Coper and Brancusi contributed to the development of forms in space became their modern achievement. Philosophically, they are allied with essences, intuition, and mysticism. Like the egg that obsessed both artists, their work was what you got when all else was pared away—or perhaps it was what one started with.

Since the advent of modern architecture, form has been identified as a primary quality, separate from style and color. As Alan Colquhoun notes, form is "a configuraton that is held to have either natural meaning or no meaning at all."[10] Modern theorists tried to abstract form into logical systems, free of associative meaning. These systems reduced building blocks to their elemental geometric shapes and stressed the outer skin as a continuous, even covering to facilitate apprehension of a building's volume. The "message" of modern architecture lies in the essence of these forms, rather than in their symbolic interpretation. Modern architects eschewed stylistic associations in favor of the pure, austere, planar surfaces

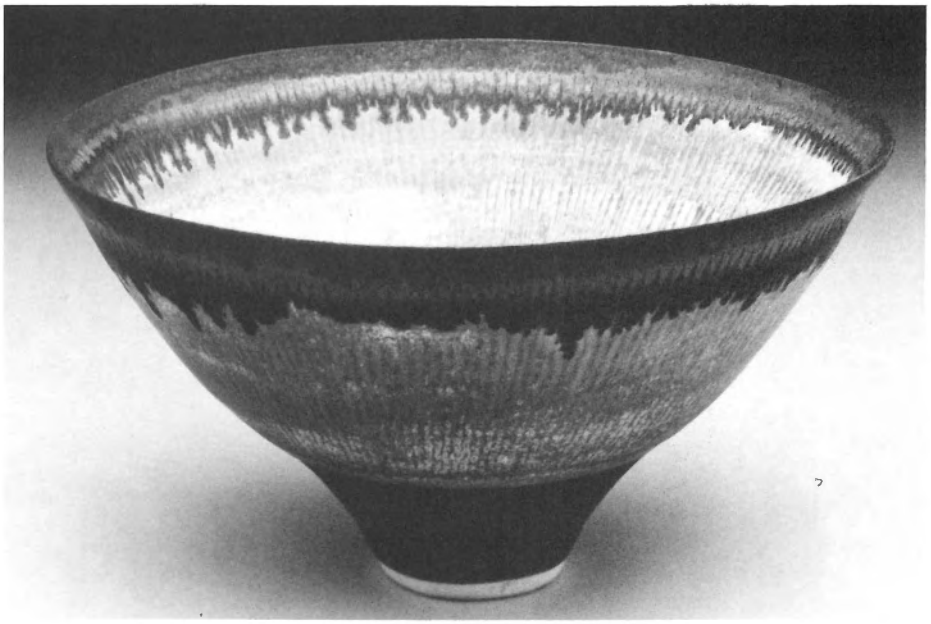
that were now seen as the skin of of an enclosed volume.
In advocating absence of ornament, the architects of the Wiener Werkstätte, particularly Otto Wagner's star pupil, Josef Hoffmann, exemplify the modern approach to form. Hoffmann believed that the right angle was "fundamental to everything" and applied this principle to his greatest achievement of the period, the Palais Stoclet in Brussels. Hoffmann's rectilinear style influenced many Viennese craftsmen in the early twentieth century, among them Lucie Rie. A comparison of the formal qualities of the Palais Stoclet and her work illuminates the modernist, anticeramic sources of her aesthetic. Kenneth Frampton has called the Palais Stoclet an example of handcrafted elegance of a Wiener Werkstätte object on a large scale. Conversely, we can view the work of Rie as small-scale architecture with all the formal complexity and definition of a Hoffmann building.
The cube is to architecture what the cylinder is to pottery—a pure, elemental form. The exterior of the Palais Stoclet is based on a cubistic grid, which can be seen as the unifying motif throughout the building; doorways, windows, even the marble cladding emphasize this rectilinearity. Projecting volumes further articulate the façade and create balance in the asymmetrical composition. The use of metal seams at the corners of the thin white marble facing is a conscious denial of the building's structure and mass, and they add a strongly linear element to the building. Both horizontal and vertical articulation render these lines neutral structurally, thus negating the feeling of a heavily constructed building.
Rie's pots, as we have seen, are built on the basic cylindrical vessel form. In her early work, she strove to render this shape as directly and simply as possible to create, as Hoffmann did, a purity, austerity, and integrity that speaks of a modern aesthetic. One of the important parallels with architectural modernism is Rie's approach to ornament. Her thin white sgraffito lines scratched through brown glaze have the same effect as Hoffmann's metal banding: they articulate and lighten the mass of the form. Dark lines around the rim or girdling a tall vase unite the composition by emphasizing rather than decorating the form. Rie's work, like that of the moderns, elevated form above all other aesthetic considerations. Ornamentation became subservient, clarifying, highlighting, and delineating formal properties. The walls of a pot are inflected by surface treatment, just as a building's walls are inflected by fenestration and cladding. Rie's palette of light and dark glazes, often mottled, creates a rich surface not unlike the surface of a modernist building.
Modernism sought a declaration of form in accordance with innate (and in the case of architecture, vernacular) qualities. This can be seen in the modernists' glorification of such mundane structures as precast concrete grain silos—pure, monolithic, anonymous cylinders. Similarly, Rie turned to the formal simplicity of the vessel in establishing her own contemporary idiom.
The tenets of the Modern Movement breached all notions of a historical past, as architecture, painting, and sculpture turned in on themselves in search of new meaning. Alienation caused by war, mechanization, and urbanization led artists in two directions: outward, toward primitive cultures where art was devoid of social context and applied meaning; and inward, toward primal universal elements with innate meaning. Abstraction became the binding syntax of a language in which purity of form and sensation supplanted representation and association.
Circumstance, as much as artistic motivation, led Hans Coper and Lucie Rie to the vessel form. Bred of European urbanism, they brought with them the developments of modern abstract sculpture and reductivist architecture. Their break with ceramic tradition was not the negation of the pot, but an intuitive introspection into the language and meaning of form. This exploration has yet to be completed.

1. The Hans Coper retrospective exhibition took place at the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, Norwich, England, in 1983; the Lucie Rie retrospective was held there in 1981 and at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in 1982. In addition, both artists have been the subjects of several exhibitions here and abroad: at Westminster Gallery, Boston; Graham Gallery, New York; and Fischer Fine Art Limited, London.
2. See John Houston, ed., *Lucie Rie* (London: Crafts Council, 1981); George Wingfield Digby, "Introduction," *Lucie Rie*, retrospective exhibition catalogue (London: The Arts Council, 1967); and Tony Birks, *Hans Coper* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, 1983; New York: Harper & Row, 1983).
3. See Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 81.
4. In Houston, *Lucie Rie*, p. 16.
5. Dore Ashton, "Abstract Art Before Columbus," exhibition catalogue (New York: André Emmerich Gallery, 1957), p. 16.
6. Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (New York: Dover, 1955), p. 62.
7. George Kubler, "Shape of Time Reconsidered," *Perspecta* 19 (1982), p. 119.
8. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Matisse: His Art and His Public* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), p. 552.
9. Herbert Read, *Concise History of Modern Sculpture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 83.
10. Alan Colquhoun, "Form and Figure," *Oppositions* 12 (Spring 1978), p. 29.

*Michael Dunas and Sarah Bodine write on art, craft, and design.*



*Three bottle forms (1970–72) by Hans Coper, tallest 8″ (20 cm) high. Collection Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts (left and right) and Henry Rothschild (center). Photo: Jane Coper.*



Untitled *(1979) by Lucie Rie, 8″ (20.3 cm) diameter, porcelain. Collection Daniel Jacobs, New York. Photo: Eric Shambroom.*

# A Handful of Beauty A Hint of Beast

*Michael McTwigan*

A John Gill pot is at once graceful and ungainly. The ease with which he fits part to part, as if constructing forms known to him since childhood, readily earns our admiration. The proportions of foot to body to shoulder to neck seem just right....And yet, something funny's going on here. Why do their necks look like funnels from a gas can? Why do their bodies appear to be two pie crusts joined together, or an overstuffed bean bag? Why do their long spouts seem more appropriate to a watering can than a wine ewer?

Gill is a tireless fabricator of forms, much in the manner of that master tinkerer, Alexander Calder. Just when we're getting used to his current infatuation, he pulls another out of his hat. And like the folk artist who turns trash into treasure, Gill blithely assembles dissimilar elements as if he were, indeed, working out of his garage—that uniquely American place of invention where Calder and the folk artist fashioned their sculptures, where the Wright Brothers built their airplane, where Steven Jobs and Stephen Wozniak assembled the Apple computer.

His pots have the deliberate look of a thing *built*, not the cylindrical simplicity of a vessel shaped on the potter's wheel. The artist is something of a constructivist in this regard, and he pays close attention to how things are made. Among his inspirations are the metal ductwork of heating and air-conditioning systems, the ceramic vessels of Robert Turner and William Daley, and the pots, glass bottles, and tin forms found in the still lifes of Giorgio Morandi. Six years ago, Gill even went so far as to take a Morandi pot and "put it in space." "I wanted to figure out what a painting would look like in reality," he explains.

While doing so, he invented his boldly painted cylinder pots, whose necks have "collapsed" to reside mysteriously inside. The result is a painting in the round that is also a *device*—an object which, when we peer into it, confronts us with the business end of a barrel that is as disarming as an erect penis. "There are all kinds of sexual things in pottery," admits Gill, who believes such facts of life have their place, if presented with subtlety—"almost so no one is aware you're saying it."

Gill relishes such odd juxtapositions. "I'm fascinated, for example, by how people live together. You really like him, and you like her, but you wonder how they can stand each other." Similarly, Gill combines soft, round, curving forms with hard, straight, mechanical ones (although even straight lines have the wavering inconsistency of the handmade). The wine ewers, for example, evolve from the world's encyclopedia of pottery form; but apart from their general configuration, they are unlike any vessels we've seen. Spouts and handles are a bit too big for the pots they adorn, and welded to every wine ewer is an oversized neck whose justification can only be found in Gill's love for funnels—straight, square, cone-, fan-, or screw-shaped—rather than in the requirements of function. The height and tapering shape of these necks more readily suggest locomotive smokestacks or chimneys—mediums for emission—than openings through which the ewers may be filled. (In a series of *House Pots* begun in 1982, these funnels became literal chimneys.) The triangular spouts of recent pots also seem inspired by nineteenth-century locomotives.

Perhaps it is this marriage of the mechanical and the organic that most surprises us. We expect the artist who finds inspiration in metal ductwork, funnels, and locomotives, who takes pleasure in the geometric elegance of ruler and compass, to abhor all that is carnal, crude, or spontaneous. Or perhaps what most surprises us about a John Gill pot is the nature of the beast itself. Among nature's familiar creatures—birds, fishes, mammals—Gill has a knack for uncovering the genetic mutations, the evolutionary misfits. Curious, too, is the fact that his ewers are horizontal in orientation, rather than vertical, and so are closer in form to tea kettles or watering cans than wine ewers. Gill underscores the conceptual distance between his playfully awkward, misshapen pots and their classical precedents by retaining the archaic term *wine ewer*. Such an appellation can only bring to mind Greek banquets attended by poets and philosophers, or besotted Roman senators at a bacchanal.

Painting seems at odds with form, too, just the way spouts, necks, and handles defy our expectations of shape and placement. A first impression suggests that Gill projects his odd-shaped fields of color onto the vessels arbitrarily. The artist takes brush in hand like one of Japan's venerable National Treasures with too much saki under his belt. Glazes are slapped and dribbled on, crawl and run over the surface, or even fail to cover it. The calligraphic brushstrokes are imprecise, as though Gill is improvising the characters as he writes them. The blobs and streaks of color are applied as impetuously as subway graffiti.

Gill's pots contain an inner force that is not the sacred energy of the Vessel, but just the plain old feistiness of an artist trying to box his way out of an enclosed form. Their animated spirit comes, too, from their resemblance to kneeling camels, perched pheasants, and nesting herons. (Gill's dreams must be peopled by a fabulous parade of Dada Disney cartoon creatures.) It's hard not to turn ornithologist in the presence of these goose-neck creatures with their ruffled handles and spotted plummage. The result is a gaggle of gamely vessels that might at any moment give out an unruly honk or toot. Though purists may cry "fowl play," John Gill's antics are in earnest.

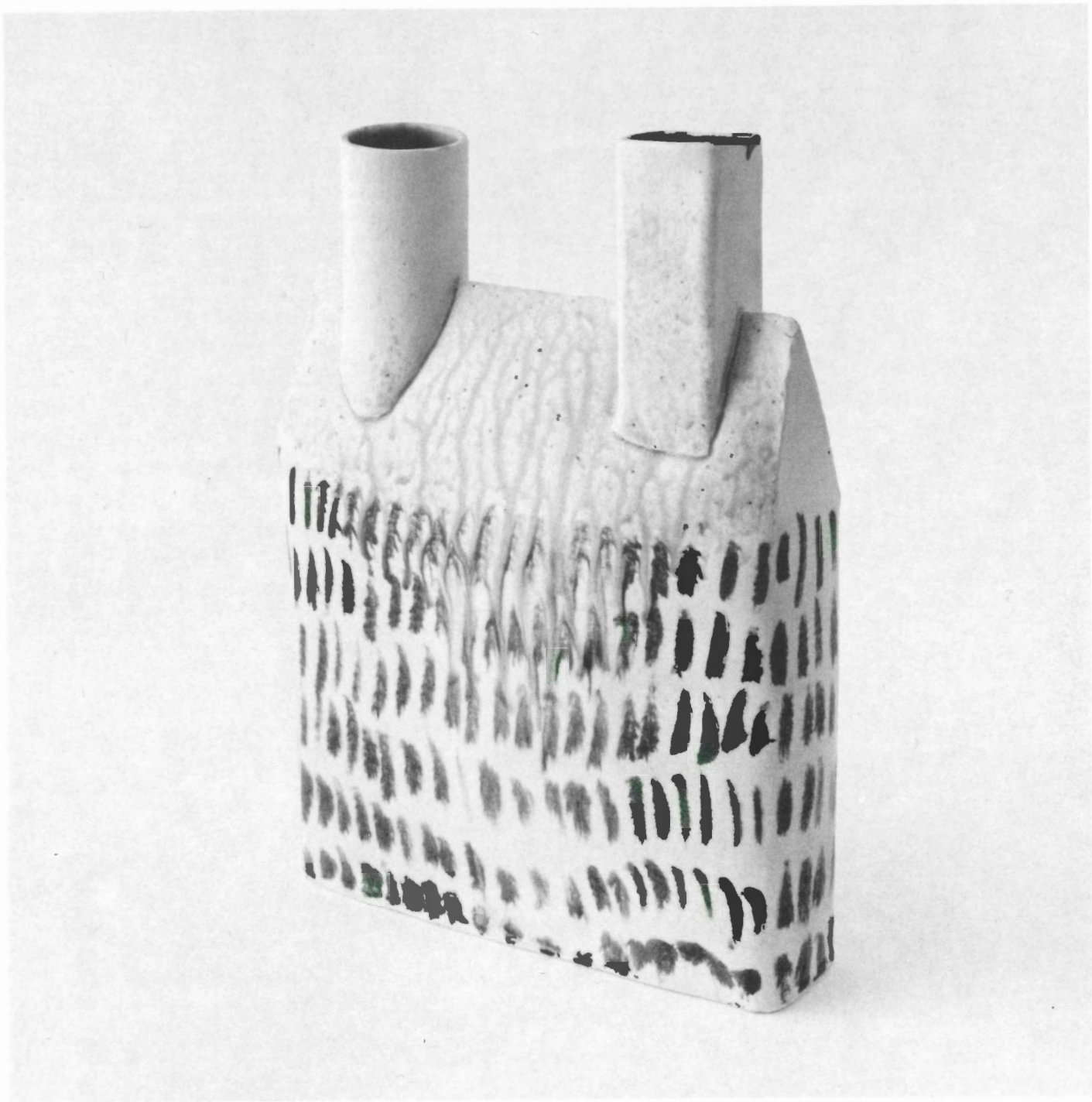
*John Gill's work is currently on view at Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, New York, and has also been exhibited at DBR Gallery, Cleveland, and Garth Clark Gallery, Los Angeles.*

Bottle *(1983), 21" (53.3 cm) high, stoneware. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries. Photo: Michael McTwigan.*

Bottle *(1982), 15″ (38.3 cm) high, stoneware. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries. Photo: Michael McTwigan.*

House Pot *(1982), 14″ (35.6 cm) high, porcelain. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries. Photo: Michael McTwigan.*

Wine Ewer *(1984), 17″ (43.2 cm) high, stoneware. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries. Photo: Michael McTwigan.*



Wine Ewer *(1982), 16″ (40.6 cm) high, stoneware. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries. Photo: Michael McTwigan.*

House Pot *(1984), 18″ (45.7 cm) high, stoneware. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries. Photo: Michael McTwigan.*

# Vessel as Center

Philip Rawson

*I placed a jar in Tennessee,*
*And round it was upon a hill.*
*It made the slovenly wilderness*
*Surround that hill.*

*The wilderness rose up to it.*
*And sprawled around, no longer wild.*
*The jar was round upon the ground*
*And tall and of port in air.*

*It took dominion everywhere.*
*The jar was grey and bare.*
*It did not give of bird or bush,*
*Like nothing else in Tennessee.*

I do not know if the reader is familiar with Wallace Stevens's poem, "Anecdote of the Jar," but it makes a first-rate point of departure for what I have to say. It lays a finger right on the spot. Stevens is making an aesthetic proposition based, most likely, on an immediate experience of his own. He means his jar to stand in for any work of art. He is saying that its role is to bring a new kind of order to surrounding and slovenly disorder. "No longer wild," the wilderness is given a focus by a manmade jar; the organic is organized. Unlike the poet, who only uses the word "jar" in a general sense, the potter can make specific, actual jars of many kinds and shapes to organize different kinds of "slovenly wilderness."

The essence of the jar—we may as well call it archetypal—is that it is vertical and round. Its circuit defines its invisible but real axis and hence it contains an inbuilt reference to the six directions of space by which it is surrounded; and, by virtue of being unified into a circular shell, it refers emblematically to the totality of space, including its environment. Stevens says the wilderness is "no longer wild." The jar, in fact, by focusing its environment, stands as the very image and instrument of civilization. It even has a slightly Classic "port in air." Even though "grey and bare," it needs no significant ornament to work its magic on the hill. It is its own agent. The poet identifies the potter, by the implications of his metaphor, as the paradigmatic creator of order in society. The circular vessel he makes works on behalf of the self—the "still point in the midst of conditions" (as distinct from mere ego)—precipitating its world around it.

For me, Stevens's poem fully answers the question potters continually ask themselves, "Why the vessel?" It explains why people like the Pueblo tribes, the Costa Ricans, the predynastic Egyptians, none of whom knew the potter's wheel, nevertheless created superbly centered pots. It explains why it is so important that "decoration" on a pot should amount to an unfolding of the centered pot's inner meaning as the meeting and gathering place of its user's self and world. It shows how each act of using centered vessels—far more of making them—can actually condense that experience of peace which René Guénon describes: "For the being who stands at the center all is unified, for he sees all in the unity of the Principle."[1]—that is to say, the universal principle of unity from which the orders of the world unfold. Any potter who has done much throwing will recognize the experience of coming somehow to occupy the space and center of the pot one is throwing. The pot form becomes one's own body, its axis, the axis of one's own being.

This whole complex idea, presented through poetic imagery, seems to me extraordinarily important to us at the moment. The marketers of art constantly urge its makers to follow succeeding waves of art fashion, which run up the beaches of patronage one by one, only to subside, one by one, as ephemeral kitsch into the sand. The painter, who now usually understands his role in art history as renegade, rebel, and destroyer of tradition, lacks the focal imagery in which every potter is usually brought up. The latter, by contrast, has an age-long fund of imagery and structure on which to draw with the tap-root of tradition. To adapt Roland Barthes's notion of literature as the exploration of the immense fund of possibilities waiting to be realized as "language" (*langue*) by means of "utterance" (*parole*), we can say that the potter has a special consciousness of the historical depth and potential reach of his or her "language," which every "utterance" may bring to resonant life in a new way.[2] The painter may adventure as a brave individualist on the periphery of art, out in the "slovenly wilderness," but doing so requires him to constantly reconstruct his language, not just his utterance, from scratch. Lacking the potter's center, the painter falls victim to the *dernier cri*, his canvas merely a reflection of present taste.

Stevens proposes his jar as a metaphor for all works of art (even those not physically centered); he presents his experience as a kind of touchstone for the value of art generally. To what extent does it succeed in focusing the poet's and the reader's environment, to

*For me, Stevens's poem fully answers the question potters continually ask themselves, "Why the vessel?" It explains why people like the Pueblo tribes, the Costa Ricans, the predynastic Egyptians, none of whom knew the potter's wheel, nevertheless created superbly centered pots.*

what extent does it offer an experience of self beyond ego? This seems to me a far more effective and stable criterion of artistic value than the gaudy proposals of fashion-conscious critics. It leaves a great deal always to be discussed, continuously analyzed, and revised. It allows potters the special and traditional dignity they know they do in fact possess. And it reconciles the conflict between those clay artists who assert the primacy of the vessel and those who feel they need to be liberated from its confines, to become "free" individual artists like all those others. Let them do it as best they can!

Perhaps they will adopt an idea familiar to painters: that the canvas is a kind of mirror onto which they project an icon of what they are seeing in it as they stand before it. The painter's problem is to make this self-engendered icon true and valid for others, and not a mere portrait of an agitated and ephemeral ego reflecting the passing show. This is not easy to do. There are many temptations to tell charming and exciting lies about what he actually sees, and what he would like his patrons to think he sees. The clay artist who abandons centered vessels will be similarly tempted. But, like the sculptor, he may find he has no canvas/mirror waiting to take the basic self-image. The vessel potter, however, because of his education, usually does have some image of a centered pot whispering at the back of his mind, reminding him of what he needs to achieve. He may even paint on or cut into a circular dish, so attempting both stances. He may make a pot that is centered by implication, but is in fact compressed from front to back and so presents a primary face—like Hans Coper's tulip vases or the forward-tilting perspectives seen in pots by Nicholas Homoky and Linda Gunn-Russel. Here the vessel as "mirror-icon" and "space-container" is invoked simultaneously. But I still believe the best pots are those you can "be in," as the thrower is, rather than just "look at." This involves accepting their invitation to become one with their axial space, with all that implies.

In this, I suppose, I am displaying my allegiance to the Great Tradition of symbolic art—a tradition derived from a careful reading of all major traditions, including neurophysiology. Psychologically and spiritually, I take these symbolic forms, which are common to all traditions, as the forms that make the clearest sense of that human construct we know as World and Space, and which we each generate within our cerebral cortex on the basis of sensory impulses, bodily responses, feelings, images of past acts and mimicry, as well as memories of human communication. So by "sense" I mean meaning. The notion of the center with its natural sanctity, which Mircea Eliade and Ananda Coomaraswamy so clearly explained,[3] seems to me to be one of the most important and fundamental of these forms. Hence its permanent value within the art of ceramics. And I think we can follow through the implications of the pot as embodying the sacred center beyond the point to which the poet Stevens brought us.

I used "sacred center" in the singular. If I was writing as a strict historian of a single tradition, the singular might suggest I was thinking of the center as a specific place on the terrain where a given people located the focus of their mythic life. This center would be the people's place of origin, perhaps that of the earth itself. (Hence the frequency with which a central hole or navel is the place of "birth" in the origin myths of so many cultures.) Our people do not have any such center. But anyone who has studied Indian culture, for example, knows that there is a sense in which every one of India's thousands of temples can be "the" center to those who use it—center of sacred space, not of profane, geometrical space. Characteristically, it is the artistic treatment that displays the mythical justification for our accepting any such place as both center and sacred. The traditional Indian temple embodies the image of the mythical Mountain Meru, which the Hindu gods used as a churning-stick to churn out worlds like butter from the mythical ocean of milk. Meru is thus the axis of the wheellike, revolving universe (compare: the potter's wheel). The axis-pillar of the world runs vertically through the body of

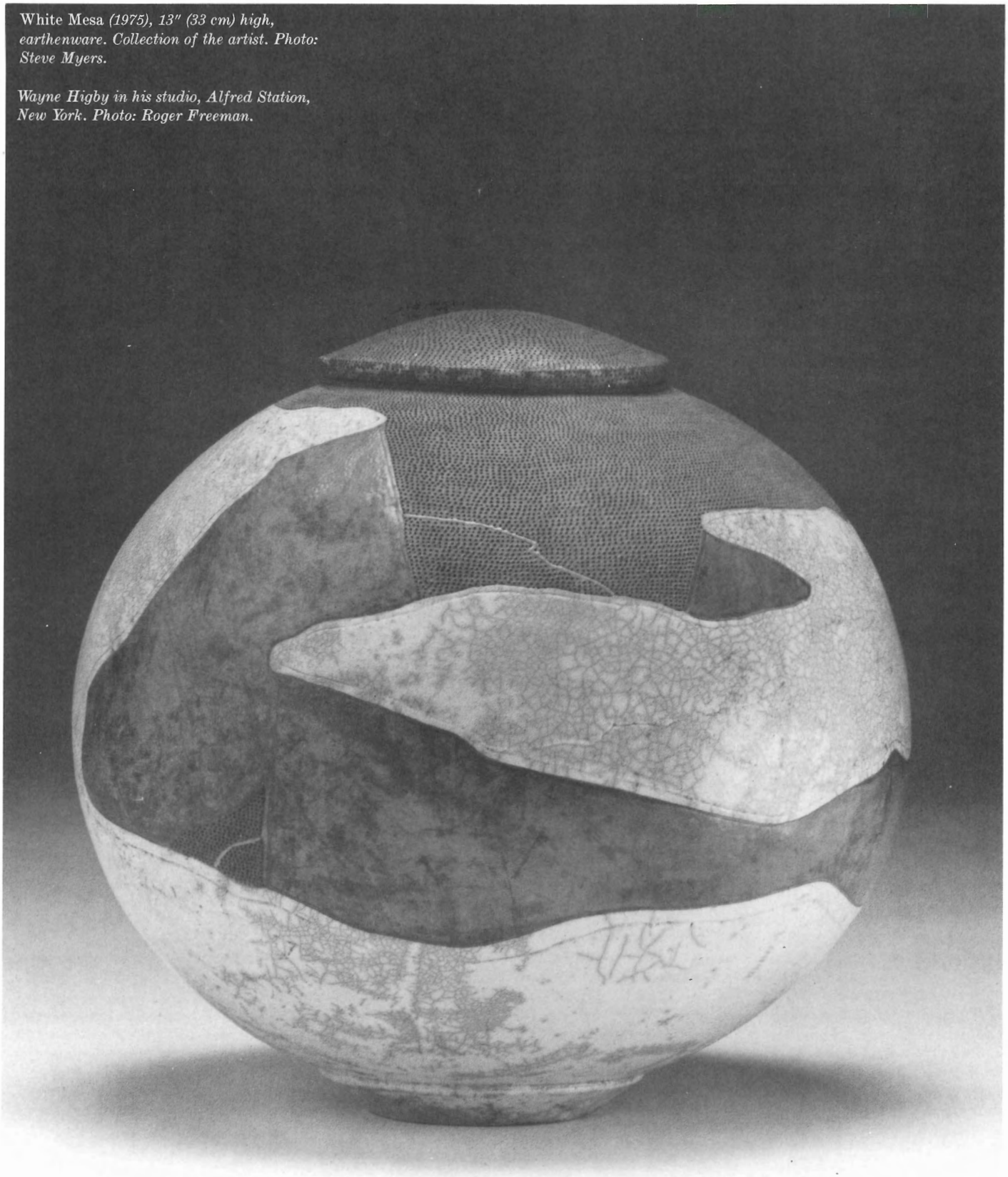
the mountain to the sun; and so it does through the main shrine of each temple, with its Meru-tower. Hence, each temple becomes the mythical center around which the churned-out worlds revolve, as the dark and distant skies do also around the Pole Star.
Temple ritual evokes the concept of the temple as center-point of communication with the Divine, as home and the goal of all spiritual return. Temple decoration symbolizes the sap of divine creative energy running through the regions of heaven and earth, which girdle the mountain like garlands. Splendor is one of the forms in which such energy manifests itself (even our word "divine" has its root in the Indo-European *div*, which means "shine") and Indian aesthetic theory recognizes the goal of art as being in some sense a splendid reconstitution of our diffused and fragmented experience at the creative center, by identifying our lesser self with the axial center of the universal self.
One of the other main symbols of the creative center that recurs again and again in the imagery of all cultures is the *Vas mysticum*, the mystical vessel. This is a centered pot so filled with the Holy Spirit that it overflows with flowers and luxuriant foliage. It is known in India, China, Islam, and the Christian world. The efflorescence symbolizes creative diffusion. The beauty of the blossoms charms the mind to focus on their source, which is sometimes interpreted as a living root. Stevens's pot was "grey and bare." It did no more than offer a center to what he felt to be a "slovenly wilderness"; otherwise it remained dumb. By contrast, it is no accident that so many of the world's great pots exhibit on their surface an imagery—often floral—of the creative activity of the *Vas mysticum*. If the centered pots we ourselves make are to have positive value rather than ephemeral appeal, we need to feel through the expression we give them the depth of archetypal meaning.
Furthermore, the potter's space I have written about elsewhere crystallizes a genuine form *of* space—immediate and present—not just a form *in* space—a general thing inhabiting a generalized, abstract, Newtonian space.

Stevens's plain pot subtended a whole fine poem. But if our centered pots stand for the mythical center, we should expect them to exhibit, in however modest a way, something of the glory natural to a sacred center. I think this is, in fact, the case throughout the history of ceramics. Each major ceramic culture has created its own intuition of space in its potter's space, and laid onto the surface of that potter's space an imagery, whether painted or in relief, that equates creation with diffusion, meaning with recollection and return. Here is one reason why pots without surface treatment *can* seem dumb, and why good surface decoration on good pots can lead them to an ultimate form of expression.
What defines the sacredness of a religious center—for example a pilgrimage center—is usually the visible appearance of a deity there, an apparition that took place long ago or that continues to take place. This apparition need not be visible to a vast public, or even obvious, but it has to be authentic, untainted by egotistic assertion. There are no simple guarantees of authenticity; only acceptance by others with insight. So usage and consistency of tradition help. This is one reason why we find the same images and metaphors reappearing again and again in and on our pots. Some vessels, such as African women's food jars, may need no decorative completion. But the lotus, white egret, and alchemical child appear again and again on Chinese painted ceramics; Italianized Classical myth on eighteenth-century porcelain; the figures of Greco-Roman idealism on the Neoclassic work of Wedgwood and his followers; and so on. If we go back to Mesopotamian Nimrud (circa 800 BC), we find beautiful, open, otherwise plain jars containing little marsh ducks standing inside. Cretan jars painted with octopus, scallops, and amazing land and sea plants, I believe, are modes of apparition of the Cretan Goddess, source of life and energy, whom Gertrude Rachel Levy has so clearly explained.[4] We can legitimately wonder about her millions of floating and flowery descendants in later ceramic traditions. Korean and Japanese tea wares, which seem most familiar to us, were judged by their original patrons for the way they were transparent to *tathatā*("suchness"), giving their user a focused insight into things-as-they-are-entire-and-radiant. We know too little about the background of Meso-American pots to be sure, but I am willing to bet their treatment also had an apparitional value. Wherever we look into the past, we find the centered pot working as a focus for revelation, never in response to craving for novel sensation or grasping at egotistical display.

It is the vessel potter's real strength that he or she cannot only focus the "slovenly wilderness" onto its center, but even transfigure that wilderness for the spectator by offering a glimpse of the *Vas mysticum*. Every generation and every potter needs to discover the imagery of form and decoration that works for their specific public. Centered potter's space stands for the universal center; and this flowers through the metaphorical richness of its chains of inner volumes and surface continuities, as well as its symbolic colors and graphic, decorative developments. I have discussed this kind of richness in my book, *Ceramics*.
Against this background, it is interesting to check the achievements of recent ceramics. Consider the work of potters who beat up on a fundamentally centered, massive vessel, like Peter Voulkos, graphically illustrating the destructive encroachment of wilderness on center; or of those who tease a handled version, a cup that should address you, with a kind of self-deprecating irony but utter dedication to splendor of glaze, like Ron Nagle; or of those who turn their centered pots into upstanding icons, like Colin Pearson. Insights can dawn. Most important, I think this notion can help orientate potters who feel their aim is not quite right, help them shift their stance as makers. At the same time, it explains why centered potting is a special art in its own right, tapping a deep source, complete with the iconography of the *Vas mysticum* at the center in embryo, and far too important to be done thoughtlessly.
Of course, the center is a metaphor, too.

1. René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, (London: Luzac, 1958).
2. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).
3. See Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols* (London, 1961), and Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Eckstein," *Speculum*, Jan. 1939. These two great writers belonged to a group of scholars, including F. D. K. Bosch and Henri Corbin, who made comparative studies of imagery and figures of thought in many world traditions. Eliade and Coomaraswamy did much of their most significant work in the United States and influenced generations of students and artists there. The group devoted themselves to exploring the ways in which art reveals, in ever new forms, archetypal nuclear images. These are not the sole property of any one tradition or era. But the art of any era that loses sight of them tends to fall into disintegrating indulgence in sensation instead of moving toward spiritual reintegration. Eliade's work arose from his study of Shamanic and yogic mythology concerning the world axis and cosmic tree, which stand for the focal point of real experience, rather than abstract thought. Coomaraswamy explored very widely the resources of traditional art and thought, always reasserting the spiritually constructive and healing values the great traditions express.
4. Gertrude Rachel Levy, *The Gate of Horn* (London, 1948).

*Philip Rawson, formerly the dean of Goldsmith College, London, is a historian, teacher, and the author of twenty-seven books on art, including* Ceramics, *which has recently been republished by the University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.*



White Mesa *(1975), 13" (33 cm) high, earthenware. Collection of the artist. Photo: Steve Myers.*

*Wayne Higby in his studio, Alfred Station, New York. Photo: Roger Freeman.*

# Wayne Higby

*Louise Klemperer*

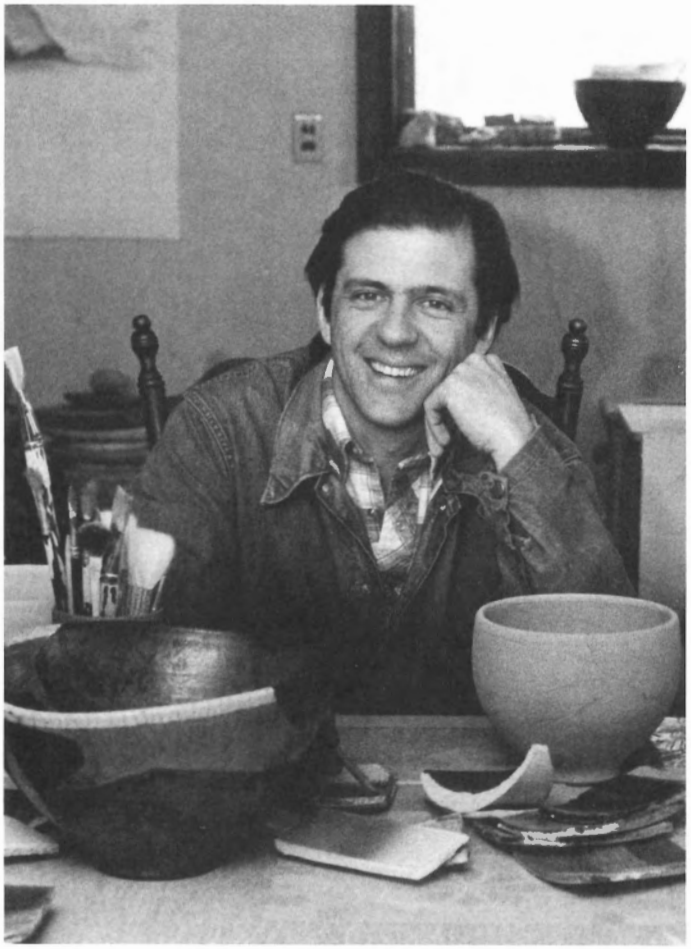
"When I was a student, I hated categories. I would always figure out a way for something not to fit into its supposed category." Beginning his lecture on contemporary ceramics with this remark, Wayne Higby goes on to divide recent work into eight categories, discussing each one by one.[1] His point: by placing a work within a context of similar works, "one can compare like with like as a basis for understanding and criticism."

He confesses that he used to be disappointed by every exhibition he attended, until he realized "I was just looking for my own work there—I was trying to translate the works of others into my own concerns. Then I decided when you go to an exhibition, it's better to leave all your baggage at the door and try to let the work speak to you."

Higby's thinking is complex, sometimes contradictory, even paradoxical. His mind leaps from idea to idea, testing things out, trying to see both sides of an issue, trying to find exceptions to any given. His dogged pursuit of ideas has won him the respect, if not always agreement, of his colleagues and has led him to participate in many activities beyond his obligations as an artist and a teacher. He is a frequent contributor to magazines and an equally frequent lecturer; he is a board member of the Gallery Association of New York State and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, and he has served on the New York State Council on the Arts in various capacities, including chairman of the Visual Artists Panel. While these and many other activities may be seen as an extension of his deep commitment to education, teaching was not Higby's first career choice.

When he entered the University of Colorado, he intended to become a lawyer like his father, but soon switched to an arts foundation curriculum. Then in 1963, interrupting his undergraduate studies, he took a trip around the world.

*I came from Colorado Springs—an upper middle class resort town—and was pretty naïve. The worst part of my trip was the week in Calcutta—was it really only a week? It seemed like a year! I remember*



*getting there and just staying in my room the whole week. That's when the big shocker came. There was a mass of humanity in that part of the world I had never experienced. There was a woman dressed only in tin cans, people sleeping in doorways with cooking fires and rugs in the middle of the street. I could not understand or rationalize my relationship to the world versus theirs. There I was in this fancy English hotel, I had money to travel, an airplane ticket as fat as a phone book, and there all those people were. At that point, I made a decision: the only way I could rationalize it was that if I had this opportunity, to make the best of it. That had a lot to do with my final decision to become a teacher, to give something back through teaching.*



When Higby returned to school, he finished his undergraduate years with a degree in painting and art education (1966). But the experiences of his *wanderjahr*, especially his encounters with Minoan and Islamic pottery, had persuaded him to become a ceramist. He attended graduate school at the University of Michigan, where he studied with John Stephenson and Fred Bauer. After teaching two years at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, and three years at the Rhode Island School of Design, Higby accepted the position of associate professor at Alfred University in 1973, where he has remained. Higby takes teaching very seriously, not in order to preach a point of view, but as an impetus for continued reflection. "Teaching helps you ask a lot of questions," he explains. "If you tell someone that their work isn't interesting, you have to tell them something else, too. That has gotten me into lots of evaluating of my own aesthetic and of myself."

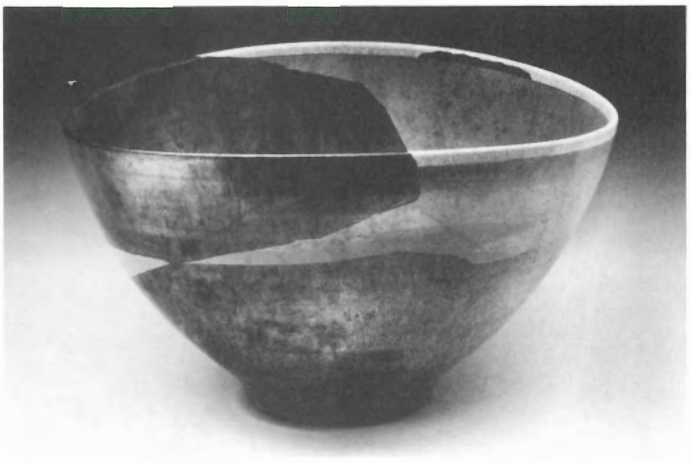
As with his lecture on the eight categories of ceramics and his teaching, Higby's ceramics also present multiple points of reference. In his well-known landscape bowls, this concept of relativity is expressed in terms of changing spatial relationships. As one turns the bowl, the position of rocky cliff or island changes. Now isolated, with a quarter turn each mass lines up so that the rock on the outer surface becomes continuous with a cliff seen on the inner surface. "When I draw on a bowl, I spend a lot of time making it work that way. When you are walking on the beach, you walk not thinking of anything, and then something catches your eye and you focus and see maybe a rock or a shell; then you move on, back out of focus. This is analogous to experiencing one of my bowls."

Not having a fixed reference point is one of Higby's major themes, and is useful not only as a visual and metaphorical device, but as an approach to teaching, lecturing, and jurying. Yet wouldn't such willingness to see all sides of things be a handicap to the artist? "When I go into my studio," he replies, "I have a very strong point of view....I have to know what my search isn't about, and then at least I can eliminate that. Sometimes the statement in an artwork is defined as much by what you leave out as what you deal with."

In the last ten years, what Higby has chosen to deal with, for the most part, is the vessel form—;"a primary archetypal example of human logic; therefore, a fundamental response of humanity." He continues:

*When the first person walked out of a cave and made a pot from which to drink water, he or she used logic and sensitivity. The vessel is figurative both in the sense of a self-portrait and in the sense that it is representative of human existence in the world. I'm very clear that the vessel form has to be tied to historic pottery shapes; half a beach ball, a hubcap, or a hole in the ground don't resonate with the vessel associations I feel. It seems very profound that after thousands of years, the vessel is a form about which people still argue—a kind of form that can still provoke discussion!*

Higby's own commitment to the vessel began with those Minoan pots he saw in Crete. "They hit me as personifications of the Minoan people and of the culture as a whole...even their stance was figurative. Those Minoan pots are very particular—they had to happen then, with those people, in that culture." Islamic bowls and platters, with their emphasis on a very close relationship between decorative imagery and form, and Islamic tiles, which are totally integrated into their architectural settings, also drew Higby's



Winter Inlet *(1975), 8 1/2" x 31" x 6" (21.6 x 78.7 x 15.2 cm), earthenware. Collection Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: Steve Myers.*

Mammoth Rock Beach *(1984), 10 1/2 " (26.7 cm) high, earthenware. Collection of the artist. Photo: Steve Myers.*

attention. In retrospect, several major themes in his work can be traced back to these early encounters. The Minoan pots demonstrated to Higby the possibility for metaphor in a clay vessel. The Islamic bowls and tiles kindled an intense interest in the relationship between decoration and form.

Unlike many ceramists who start out with the Japanese folk art ideal as one of their fixed reference points, Higby says "I never made functional, production pots. My orientation toward pottery was always the intellectual or aesthetic considerations of historical work." And while such past traditions as the Islamic, Minoan, Chinese, and Japanese continue to matter to him, it was again personal experience that led him to another major theme of his current work. A long drive through the Southwest in 1969 on his way to a summer teaching assignment at the University of Washington "put me back in touch with things from my childhood."

*Going back through my hometown and the area of the country where I grew up started me questioning: "Who am I, really? I'm responsible for all this now...what does it mean?" As my feelings about my life, my childhood, and more intimate thoughts bubbled up, I decided to try to connect with them in a personal way in my ceramics, rather than solely continue to reinterpret ceramic art history.*

Higby had already been using landscape imagery on his pots, but the trip through the Southwest reminded him how important that landscape had been to him as a child. That summer he began a series of single containers that take their shape from the forms of clouds, valleys, or rocks. Soon Higby was applying landscape scenes to groups of jars that, when fitted together, formed a zigzag surface not unlike a Japanese folding screen. With these containers, Higby began moving toward a sculptural format.

But once at Alfred, his original interest in ceramics—the vessel—reappeared. Higby explains this preference by recalling his original move to Alfred in 1973. "While at RISD, I was working in the basement, so my imagery came from imagined or remembered scenes. When I moved to Alfred, my studio had a window that looked out onto a soft, rolling landscape. I wanted to get this feeling of softness into my work. The slabs seemed too severe to reflect this environment, so I started throwing bowls on the wheel." Perhaps Alfred University's well-established predisposition for the potter's wheel also influenced him, although Higby decorates his bowls in a manner quite unlike the "Alfred Pot" style.

Higby's attitude toward the landscape scenes he places on his bowls is very complex. On the one hand, he strives toward what he calls the particular:



*Particular: if you pick a leaf off a tree and look at its veins and lines, you see that they have inner integrity and a sense of being right, they are particular to that leaf and very special, and get to be particular because of the way the leaf grew. Particular: the crucial, critical aspect, the distinguishing characteristic. The way the water makes contact with the shore—the kind of line that's formed is a very special, intense line with a rightness about it. Nonparticular: generic. Or, nonparticular: the early drawings of students before they begin to see, look, interpret things through their own values.*

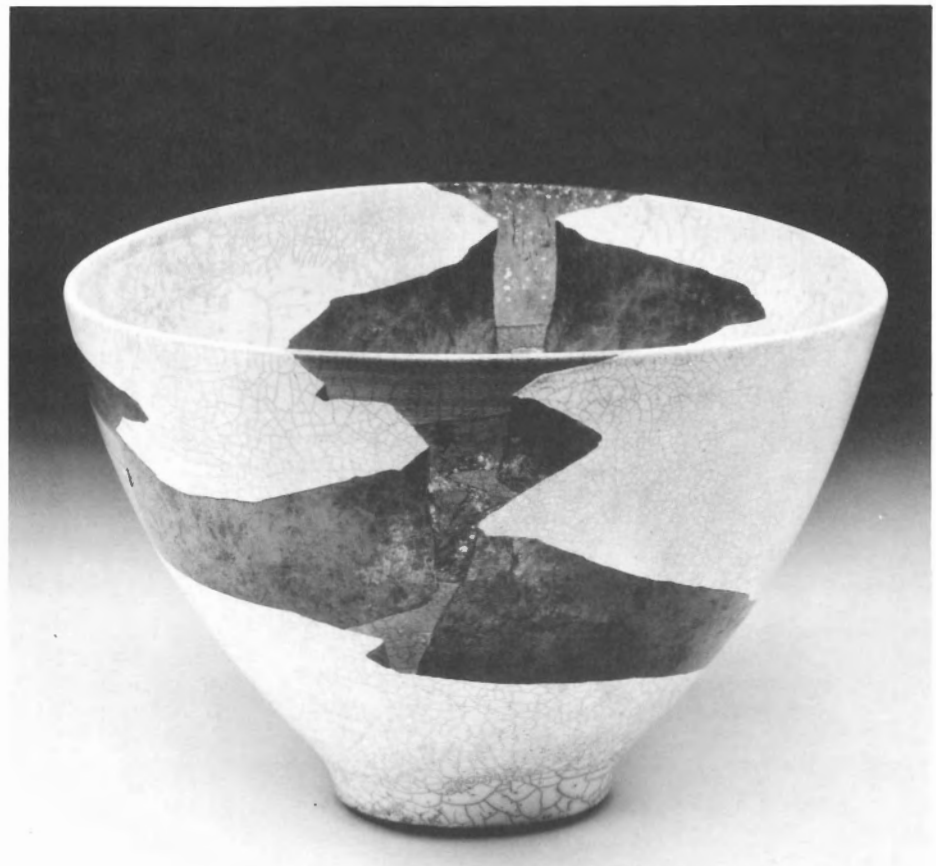
Although Higby strives for this quality of particularity in his landscapes, and uses landscape as his predominant form of imagery, "I would very much like my audience to understand that my work is *not* primarily having to do with putting a landscape on a pot."

*When Van Gogh painted a landscape, he wasn't intending to paint a picture. Cézanne, Monet, Gauguin were not just picture painters. They all had more than the image in their minds and the fact that you can see the image clearly isn't all that there is. Like them, and like many Chinese and Japanese painters, I'm interested in imagery as a vehicle for my thinking.*

He goes on to explain the kind of metaphorical meanings he intends:

White Terrace Gap *(1984), 11 1/2 " (29.2 cm) high, earthenware. Collection of the artist. Photo: Steve Myers.*

Return to White Mesa *(1978), 12" (30.5 cm) high, earthenware. Collection of the artist. Photo: Steve Myers.*



*I like to think that there's an equal tension or balance between the three-dimensional form and the drawn illusion of projecting and receding space. It's a balancing. I think of that pot as a figure. People ask why there aren't any people in my landscapes, but the pot itself is a figure, a personification of a kind of human condition, a series of polarities: the pot is me. As the bowl radiates outward, it becomes a metaphor for human consciousness and our strange existence in space. The bowl form has that potential resonance; it can deal with finite space and infinite, illusory space—things that also exist in our psyches.*



Like the juxtaposition of the finite and the infinite, there are many other paired oppositions of importance in Higby's vessels: near/far, light/dark, warm/cold, smooth/rough, shiny/matte, high/low—all contribute to the sense that these bowls are a meeting ground for opposites. But the most developed polarity is that of the real surface of the bowl played off against the illusory, drawn space. And in this, a series of paradoxes or reversals are apparent.

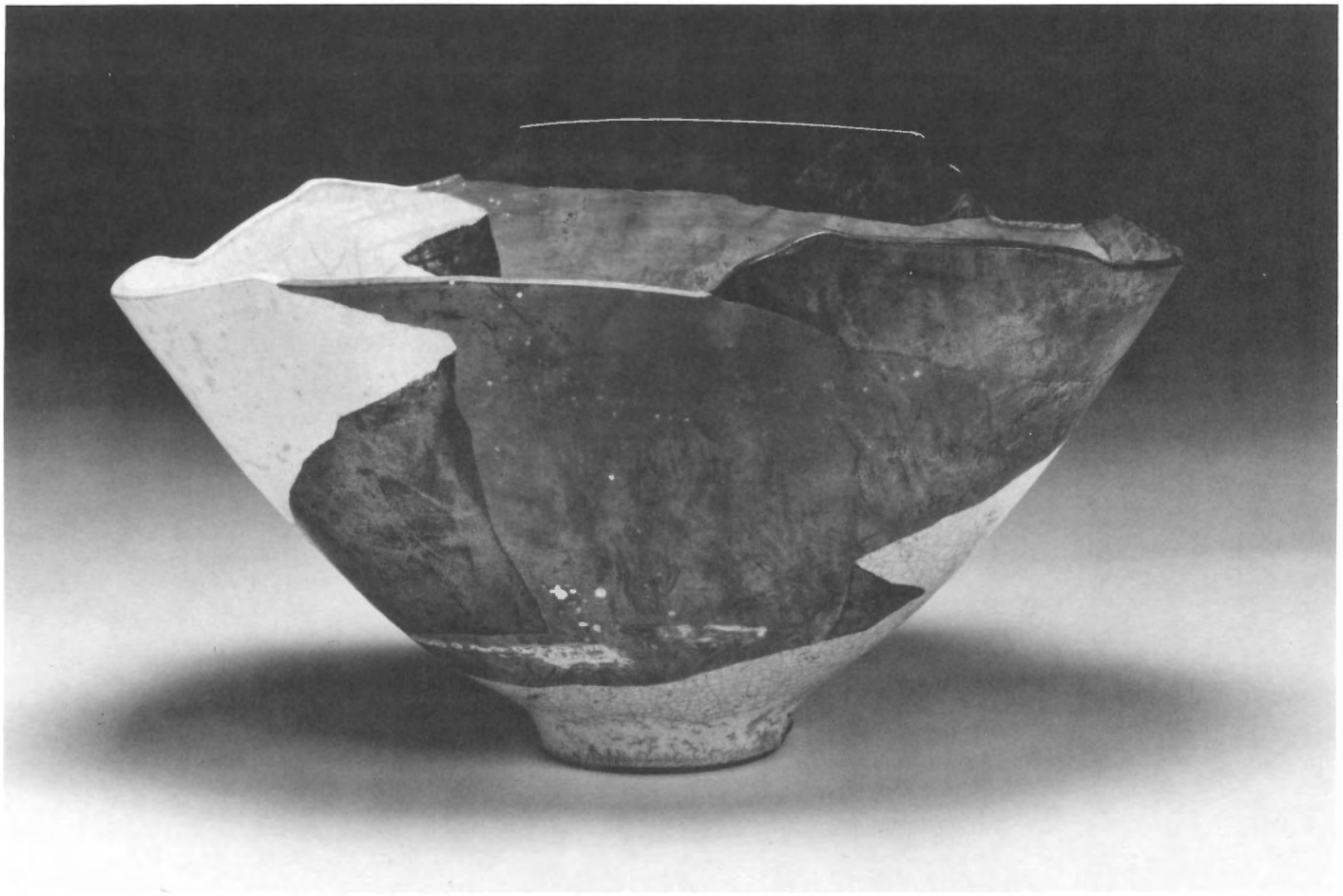
If we consider a Higby bowl *as* a bowl, it may be seen to exist in our world, small enough to be lifted by a pair of outstretched hands. But if we attempt to enter the landscape, we must do so by an act of the imagination, an imagined scaling down of our size to fit into his mountains and rivers. However, as soon as we try to imagine entering this landscape, we are pushed back by the outer, often shiny, surface of the bowl. Again, the bowl's concave interior, as well as the illusion of depth, invite us in, yet the abstract image does not provide a welcoming landing place. And, paradoxically, the area painted at the top of the bowl is often the lowest point within the illusory space of the landscape. Which is more real—the bowl or the extremely convincing heights and depths of the jagged landscape drawn on it? The scene almost hovers and penetrates through the bowl's surface like a mirage.

One way Higby attempts to fuse some of these polarities is through a mechanism he calls "crossing over," which operates similarly to the use of a black dot for the white fish's eye and a white dot for the black fish's eye in the yin/yang circle symbol. Higby explains this by talking about the polarity of form and decoration: "Often students will mistakenly give equal emphasis to form and decoration. This may yield a static quality, or be like two freight trains on a collision course. Some sort of crossing over is needed to create integrity." Choosing Sung Chinese dragon vases and Minoan pots, he points out instances where the decoration repeats parts of shapes seen in the form, or where the decoration gives emphasis to areas where the form swells to its fullest. "In these pots," he says, "you can't see the pot without the decoration, or the decoration without the form. It goes beyond mere ornament—you need one to see the other." Higby doesn't have a simple formula for creating such effects in his own vessels. Part of a bowl's profile, especially the transitional area from foot to body, may be repeated in the zigzagging line that delineates the top edge of a cliff; or the widest area in the drawing may occur at the widest area of the bowl's form.

Why are these opposing pairs, and their occasional crossing over, so important to Higby?[2] Some of his personal associations become clear as he describes an experience he had while teaching at Haystack:

*At the Maine coast, I would sit on a rock and just stare at the horizon lines—an experience that made me feel content, yet at the same time contained a mystery to it. I thought if you could go out there where the sky meets the water, you could turn yourself on your side and slip out beyond this world. Then you could see everything simultaneously and understand. There it is again, in my experience of the Maine coast: my body's physical limits, the restrictions of something tangible, sensual, temporal, combined with the thing about infinity, the unknown.*

Crossing over seems to suggest the truth of illusion, the illusion of apparent reality. By crossing over, and by including so many pairs of opposites, his artwork becomes a means of joining these opposites. "Perhaps the meaning is in the relationship of the opposites," Higby speculates.

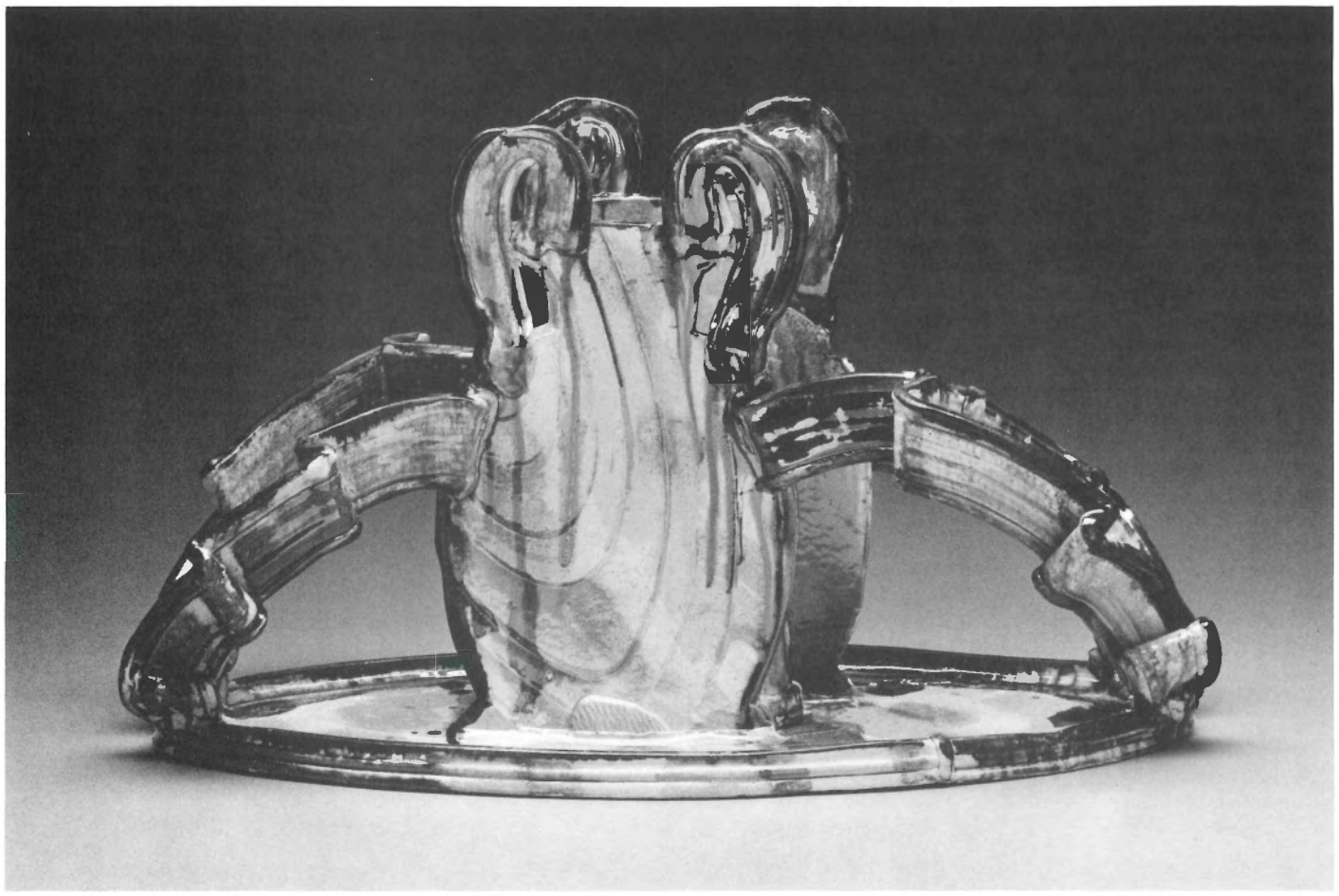


*If you could fuse all the meaningful opposites, it would be a way to get to heaven. If you could fuse them, you'd have understanding; if you had understanding...I don't know...is that the goal? Maybe my experience in Calcutta was, "I don't understand" and my work is a byproduct of trying to understand. I don't know what I'll get if I ever get to clarity...I think contentment, but maybe I'll stop....*
*I've always thought of my work as a political statement. I want an understanding of my work to draw out the better things that man is capable of—something poetic and beautiful. I want to stress something about man's ability to transcend.*
*I don't understand whether suffering is a necessity or not. Instead, I think of conflict, paradox, not of light and dark. I don't think of constrictions of reality as dark, they're limitations that allow understanding, if you know how to use them. You can live life and not feel it, you can feel it so much it destroys you, or you can feel it and use it for understanding. So my landscapes are a lot more than landscapes. I don't know, you just keep working it out....This sounds like my mid-career artist's statement....Voulkos used to be very articulate—read the old ACC minutes—and at some point he stopped talking. Maybe later, like Voulkos, I won't say much.*

1. Higby's eight categories are: (1) Functional Pots. (2) Vessels: pottery about pottery. (3) Decorative Pieces, meant to be seen within a larger context. (4) The Object, self-contained, self-referential. (5) Modern Sculpture, inspired by late nineteenth- or twentieth-century issues in sculpture, such as modernism. (6) Painting and Drawing in Three Dimensions: work which maintains the sense of a drawing or gestural sketch; it is somewhat autobiographical, close to self-portraiture, and relies heavily upon the plastic qualities of clay. (7) Modern Painting on Clay, inspired by nineteenth- or twentieth-century issues in painting. (8) Architectural Ceramics: work that is functional or decorative within an architectural context, or is about architectural concerns.
2. Carl Jung theorized that some alchemists, while going through the physical activities of combining various elements, were simultaneously imagining or hallucinating a series of images, hoping to produce the Philosopher's Stone. Jung thinks this Stone was a symbol for personal psychological development or individuation and that this psychic maturing, rather than the actual production of gold, was the goal of some alchemists. The images produced at the beginning of this process often contained sets of opposites that were symbolically united in a marriage of two key figures. See Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 34–35, 230–231, 242–254, 274–278, 327–329.



*Louise Klemperer is a free-lance writer living in Portland, Oregon. She teaches design and a class on developing personal imagery at the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts.*



# The Vessel Is Like a Pot

*Wayne Higby*

Eight years ago I was in Chicago to see an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, "Contemporary Crafts: An Aesthetic View." Among the works shown were at least four clay pieces by Peter Voulkos, mounted on the wall. Structurally, they comprised an exaggerated rim, an interior space that was decidedly concave, and a pronounced foot ring around which wire was wrapped to facilitate hanging. Each piece had been thrown on the potter's wheel and fired to stoneware temperature.

Although they resembled oversized dinner plates, they were catalogued and labeled as drawings.

In order to understand this curious definition, one has to take into account what was not present in these pieces, for all critical indicators suggested that they were, in fact, pots. Only one element was missing—utility. Even if they were removed from the wall, these plates were obviously too big and heavy to be conveniently portable. In addition, they had been torn, slashed, and otherwise violated to such an extent that one could only stare at them in wonder. These pots didn't and couldn't do anything; they simply provided a playing field for an artistic game of chance and adventure. So each piece was simultaneously a plate and a drawing.

By eliminating function and exploiting the pot as a pure form, Voulkos had done more than just draw on a plate; he had questioned tradition. He had altered the plate using his innermost feelings to map its boundaries. In the process, he had revealed, rediscovered, and revitalized a traditonal form. Today, as in the past, Voulkos creates works of art, not as a painter or a sculptor, but as a maker of vessels. He is not the first nor the only significant artist to make art from the potter's point of view, but because his work is so well known and revered, his plates serve as a convenient example of the following definition:

*The contemporary vessel is an object that presents the formal essence of the pot exaggerated to reveal a personal artistic vision uninhibited by pragmatic issues of function.*

The word "vessel" is commonly found in the research and textbooks of such scholarly professions as anthropology, archaeology, and art history. Funerary and other ritualistic pots are almost always referred to as vessels; similarly, Shang bronze containers, especially significant to the history of prehistoric and ancient art, are never referred to as pots. Because an ordinary ceramic utensil houses information of great value to these fields of knowledge, because it is so central to the study of human evolution and culture, to describe it as a "pot" seems inadequate.

As a result of such long-standing use, then, it is quite legitimate to describe a special pot as a "vessel." Currently, the term is also proving useful in distinguishing a pot of artistic merit from its banal counterpart. Consequently, the "vessel" is thriving in the milieu of contemporary ceramics, not only because it serves the critics well, but because it suits the marketing strategies of dealers. Unfortunately, the term's relevance is threatened by indiscriminate application. Its edge of clarity cannot survive the constant erosion caused by misuse. From time to time, vocabularies must be updated by the thoughtful consideration and mutual understanding of those who write, teach, curate, buy, and sell. I hope the discussion and definition offered here will bring new energy to the evaluation process.

The ascendency of individualism coupled with the theoretical nuances of twentieth-century Modernism have allowed artists to see and approach the pot as pure form. Repeatedly, it is claimed to be the most abstract of art forms. Pottery does not, however, exemplify the extremely reductive characteristics of modernist art.

Modernism's great achievement was the creation of an autonomous art utterly removed from concerns of daily life. Pottery, by contrast, affirms life and, even when explored as pure form, inevitably reflects the nature of human existence. The pot serves as a form of expression that triggers a rich variety of references. Modernism's search for purity led to an unprecedented degree of aesthetic sterility. As a way out of this void, artists began looking back in search of what had been left

Plump Napkin Holder *(1983) by Betty Woodman. Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York.*

Wine Ewer *(1984) by John Gill, 22" (55.6 cm) long. Collection Marjorie Wyman. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, New York.*

on the road to utopia. Utility, abandoned long ago, was clearly one of these lost qualities. And although every artist knew that utility *per se* must remain in exile (for complex reasons of art history and art marketing), it could nevertheless be incorporated symbolically. One strategy for wedding function to the more abstract, formalist concerns of Modernism can be seen in the appearance of sculpture that employs the vocabulary of architecture. Such work introduces human need, physical and emotional, and human ingenuity to contemporary sculpture that had heretofore lacked any such human connection. Like architecture, the vessel, too, is an archetypal form that inherently touches the same emotional chord.

Earlier in this century, in prophetic recognition of Modernism's eventual stagnation, a few artists intuitively turned to pottery as an expressive means. Although pots had been previously toyed with by artists, a concern for pottery as fine art did not gain serious momentum until the 1950s. As the major movements of Modern art came to a standstill, interest in the pot as a vehicle for creative adventure grew. The relentless search for the avant-garde led to the gradual elevation of "low art" forms (pottery) and materials (clay) to the realm of "high art" and those artist-potters whose work appeared closest to mainstream modernist styles in painting were the first to be recognized by the art establishment.

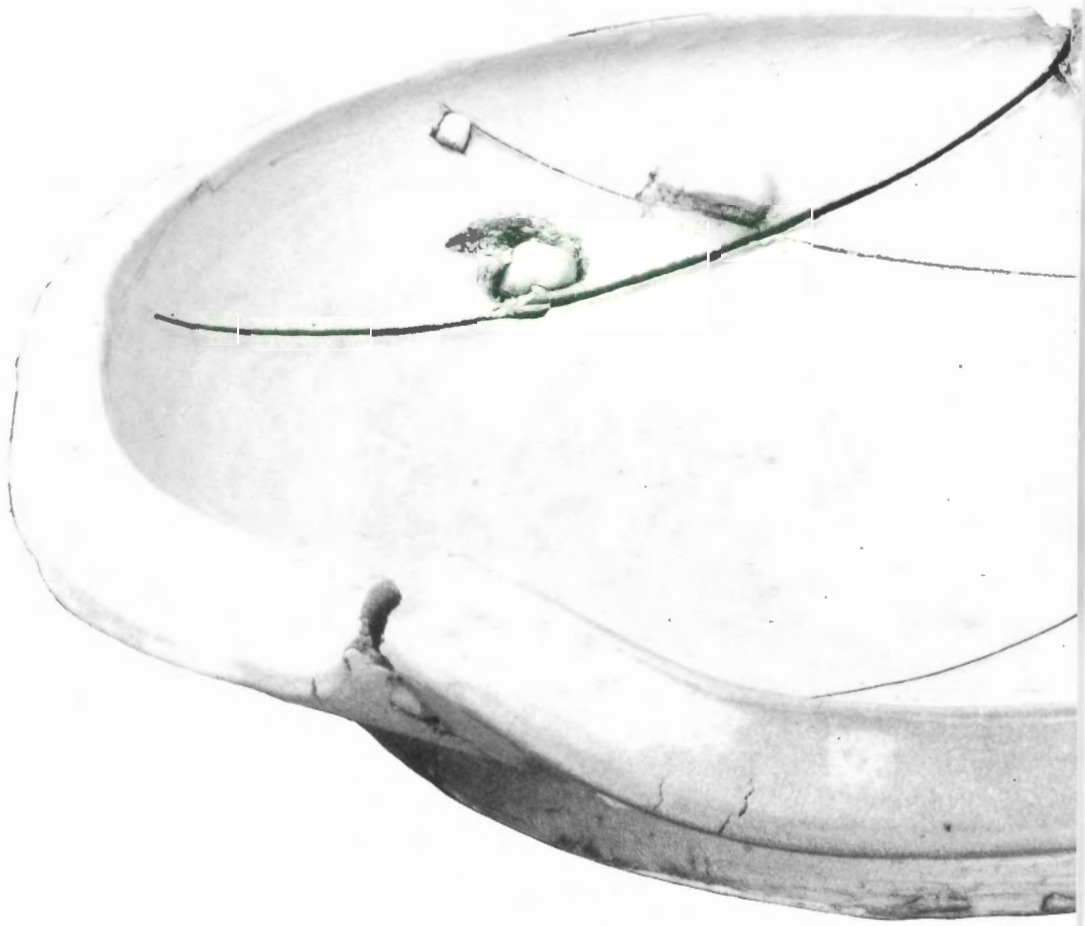
Artists currently working in the vessel format are pursuing a course that extends and expands earlier explorations. Their work continues to blend characteristics of Modernism with traditional and eccentric perceptions of ceramic art. John Gill is one young artist whose work epitomizes the recent revolution of vessel aesthetics. His work skillfully and poetically fuses distinctive pottery structure with surface dynamics reminiscent of the best Modern compositional styles. His splendid ewers suggest function, but avoid its grasp. Here function is a theoretical puzzle seen through the kaleidoscope of ceramic history.

Betty Woodman approaches function similarly. Her well-known *Pillow Pitchers* obviously do not function, but they do cause us to think seriously about something we had previously dismissed as an object of mere convenience. They explore utility as an abstraction, connecting a dramatic manipulation of materials with the resonance of a familiar form.

Not all contemporary vessels incorporate such overt references to utility as these, however. William Daley's architectonic, geometrically conceived pieces are equally compelling. He explores pottery form as a complex metaphor for human habitat. His work captures a sense of place as it alludes to house, Pueblo kiva, and the general mysteries of enclosure. Outside and inside merge to form an infinity of visual connections that lend further potency to their timeless quality. He intensifies their meaning by utilizing subtle references to function: he explores pottery space and restricts his work to the common scale of pottery form. If the pieces were indeed functional, however, his artistic judgment would undoubtedly be concealed by the realities of use.

The contemporary vessel must express the irreducible dynamics of pottery, but remain outside the realm of function. When the possibility of use enters into the vessel equation, the pure formal essence of the pot is altered to accommodate practical considerations that inevitably restrict the artist's freedom. A pot that is neither a vessel nor a functional object will lack definitive presence and create confusion in the viewer's mind. Confusion is not the same as ambiguity. Daley's work thrives on ambiguity; it contains elements that can be understood in more than one way. But he is also certain of his goal and he directs the viewer toward a central theme. The resulting clarity of his work is one of its great strengths. Such clarity often marks the difference between interesting or entertaining art and art of major importance.

I do not mean to denigrate one form of artistic expression in order to celebrate another. Functional pottery is an important and vital part of ceramics and many of today's leading vessel makers have addressed the useful pot with conclusive

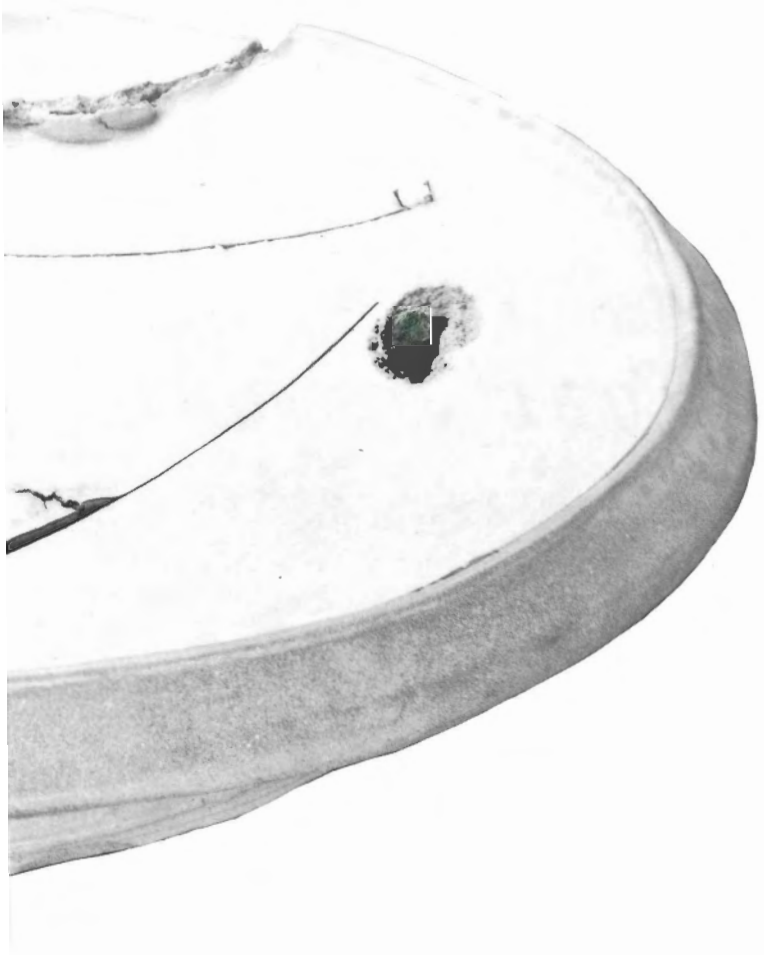


insight. One can hope that in the future our culture will be sophisticated enough to value human life in such a way as to appreciate the potential beauty of a handmade cup. It does not bring that day any closer, however, by confounding critical discourse to suggest that everything is the same. The contemporary vessel is a fundamental alteration in the history of pottery. Although it may appear to be nothing new, it is a decisive innovation among the many innovations necessary in the unavoidable process of re-evaluation and change in the visual arts.

*Wayne Higby is professor of art and chairman of the ceramic art division at New York State College of Ceramics/Alfred University. Represented by Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia, his work is the subject of an essay in this issue of* American Ceramics.

Untitled *(1978) by Peter Voulkos, 24" (61 cm) diameter. Collection Robert Turner. Photo: Brian Oglesbee.*

*Pots by William Daley in his Philadelphia studio (1984).*



# Holding the Center

## Warren MacKenzie and the Core of Vesselmaking

Dale K. Haworth and Karen F. Beall

The word *vessel* for most of us exists in the realm of abstraction; a vessel seems to be "out there" somewhere with Plato's essences, detached form both maker and user. And, despite its dictionary definition—"a hollow utensil used as a container"[1]..."usually one of circular section and made of some durable material...especially in domestic use,"[2] we probably get the flavor of the term more fully from poetic or philosophical writings:

*Hath not the potter the power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?*[3]

Or these verses of Omar Khayyám:

*Shapes of all Sorts and Sizes, great and small,*
*That stood along the floor and by the wall*
*And some loquacious Vessels were; and some*
*Listened perhaps, but never talked at all.*

*Said one among them—"Surely not in vain*
*My substance of the common Earth was ta'en*
*And to this Figure molded, to be broke,*
*Or trampled back to shapeless Earth again."*

*Then said a Second—"Ne'er a peevish Boy*
*Would break the Bowl from which he drank in joy;*
*And he that with his hand the Vessel made*
*Will surely not in after Wrath destroy."*[4]

The idea of the vessel, it seems, is large enough to emcompass all:

*Now entertain conjecture of a time*
*When creeping murmur and the poring dark*
*Fills the wide vessel of the universe.*[5]

Warren MacKenzie's vessels, however, adhere more appropriately and eloquently to the dictionary's everyday meaning, and although their forms are experienced as elegant and subtle, utility is integral to their being. So strong is this integration of the useful and the aesthetic in his wares, they are more comfortably designated simply as *pots.*

MacKenzie's earliest training in ceramics was as a student of Myrtle French at the Art Institute of Chicago immediately after World War II. He had entered art school as a painter and only began studying ceramics by default when the painting classes were full. Some of his first prints and paintings reveal a strong Bauhaus influence, which was so prevalent in professional art schools after the war, and his earliest clay pieces, tight and rather linear, are similarly Bauhaus in manner. However, with other ceramic students he soon discovered Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book* (published in England in 1940 and in America in 1946), which changed his approach to pottery making almost one hundred and eighty degrees. He discarded the deliberate calculations of the designer in favor of a total immersion in the act of working—experiencing directly the sensuous quality of plastic clay. MacKenzie has said of this dramatic change:

*Leach set a whole new tone on what a potter could be, as opposed to what I was learning in school....At that time schooling was cut-and-dried technical information. There was no acceptance of pottery as a way of life or expression of an individual. Leach approached pottery in a much more total view. Your pots were an extension of you....The important thing was that he treated pottery as a serious activity. That was a revelation.*[6]

MacKenzie discovered that working in clay had greater possibilities for personal expression for him than working in paint, so Leach's ideas were impressed on the mind of a very receptive new potter. With his wife, Alix, MacKenzie spent two and a half years (1949 to 1952) as an apprentice in Leach's studio in St. Ives, England. (Alix, who died in 1962, also was a potter and the primary glazer/decorator of the team.) MacKenzie found the reality of working at St. Ives different, however, from what he had read in Leach's book. At the pottery, Warren and Alix would throw and decorate fifty to one hundred standard-ware pots a day following Leach's specifications. In later years, Leach himself became aware of the difference between the romantic ideal expressed in his book and the actual day-to-day activities of his workshop. It was the idealism of Leach—communicated through living in the same house with him—not the daily practice of the pottery, that fired up MacKenzie.

Leach's personal influence is profoundly felt in MacKenzie's work: both in the rigorous discipline of working many hours a day at the wheel (he continues to use the foot-powered Leach wheel) and in his complete dedication to affordable, utilitarian ware. Fundamentally, Leach served as a catalyst in MacKenzie's early career when it was most needed. As the American recalled on Leach's death in 1979: "What is more important than acceptance or rejection of any particular expression is to understand the openness and searching that motivated everything he did."[7]

As a painter turned potter, MacKenzie had difficulty translating painting on canvas to making images on pots, so he turned to monoprinting, beating with paddles, and a poured glaze decoration that "kept the brush out of my hand." The paddled surfaces and poured glazes point to the major influence on MacKenzie's work—Oriental ceramics, particularly traditional Japanese and Korean Yi Dynasty ware. Leach toured the United States in 1949

Flanged Bowl *(1955) by Warren and Alix MacKenzie, 4" (10.2 cm) high, stoneware. Photo: Robert A. Grove.*

Ferkin *(1979), 5 1/8″ (13 cm) high, stoneware. Photo: Robert A. Grove.*

*(Left and right):* Vase *(1961), 4 1/8″ (10.5 cm) high, stoneware;* Vase *(1978/79), 3 3/4″ (9.5 cm) high, stoneware. Photo: Robert A. Grove.*

(when the MacKenzies first met him) and in 1952 when he was accompanied by Shoji Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi. Two giants in Japanese art, the potter Hamada became a Living National Treasure and Yanagi was the philosophical father and spokesman for Japan's folk art movement. Through Leach, if not during his stay in Japan as a member of the occupation army at the end of the war, MacKenzie had become very much aware of things Japanese. The lecture tours of these three men crystalized specific attitudes about form for him.

MacKenzie's vessels are modest in size, the number of shapes relatively few, although there are infinite numbers of subtle distinctions among them. Because they are generous in form, however, photographs of isolated pieces tend to monumentalize them, in both senses—making them appear larger than they are and more remote from everyday use. Hand-nesting cups, teapots, bowls of various sizes, as well as the normal wares of dining and food preparation are predominate; one-of-a-kind "show" pieces (still utilitarian) come out of his kiln regularly, but they are always fewer in number.

MacKenzie works in stoneware and porcelain and has both a salt and a reduction kiln. He especially likes Korean Yi Dynasty porcelain because it is thick and not precisely worked, yet it has the sense of refinement and otherworldliness of porcelain. His own porcelain wares, like those he admires, are characteristically thick bodied, cansual in appearance, and slightly impudent.

For MacKenzie, the shape of the vessel is paramount: "the way light falls on it and reveals or conceals details; its success as a container or support for food and drink; and the sense of the shape and how it presents itself." He decorates his pots "out of necessity" and even though "the surface skin is critical," its real purpose is to reveal the "gesture" of the vessel shape.

His shapes mostly come back upon themselves (this is a development of more recent years—the characteristic was not strong in early works). If one uses one's hands to describe his pots, you find that almost always there is a slight swelling at the pot's middle; even in those works with relatively vertical or straight sides, there exists a flow *into* the interior over the top at the lip, and into the base at the bottom.

His pieces are self-contained and they rarely project into another space, but instead summon us into theirs. Aside from handles and spouts on teapots and cups, only small, pinched loops, mostly on jars or vases, interrupt the clear profiles of his forms. These loops echo functional antecedents found on Japanese and Chinese ware and on Minoan pithoi, and their presence speaks of their past as well as their present use.

Surface decoration similarly is not profuse. There is almost never an eccentric surface and the relationship between shape and surface is an intimate one; in fact, in most instances, rich glazing delineates the form of the vessel. The decoration ranges from an encasing body of single-colored glazes (temmoku, shino, oatmeal, celadon, for example) to vessels where a glaze is more emphatically contrasted (temmoku with variations from light brown to black, or shino with grays and oranges). These simple glazes are further enriched by giving texture to the surface of the vessel, as when it is paddled, scraped, fluted, faceted, or cut and banded. Finally, some surfaces are patterned by using wax resist over a transparent glaze, by double glazing, or by finger combing. Interiors and exteriors are frequently decorated differently.

Vessels are an integral part of MacKenzie's daily life in two senses—he is either sitting at his wheel making them, or he is using them in his home. Gnerally, he does not use his own, however, as he believes that a good ceramic piece expresses something of the creator, so to use his own pots would be "like talking to yourself." He prefers to prepare food, eat, and drink from ware made by others, often friends.

In his dining room, one sees pieces by Hamada and Leach, Lucie Rie, Hans Coper, Michael Cardew; there are historical pieces from Korea, Japan, Germany, and the United States; elsewhere are works by Ken Ferguson, Betty Woodman, and Peter Voulkos, among others. Guests are frequently invited to select their own drinking vessels and MacKenzie's friends and students, including John Reeve, Randy Johnston, Wayne Branum, and Mark Pharis, are well represented on his shelves.

Beyond their utilitarian function, containing liquid, food, or flowers, MacKenzie's pots are meant to attract and to engage our senses. And although this aesthetic aspect is present in the works of other ceramists, MacKenzie's especially invite one to handle them, to run one's fingers over their surfaces. Of this sense of touch, MacKenzie has written:

*What level of experience do we achieve by running a hand over a Formica counter, gripping the rim of a stainless steel mixing bowl, or touching the door of a refrigerator? Even materials that have an intrinsic tactile surface, such as wood, are rendered neutral by being permeated with plastic and isolated from our tactile sensors. As a result, we are deprived of one of the basic senses with which potters must concern themselves, since the forms and surfaces they create are made by the pressure and grip of their hands on the clay. In some standardized and repetitive ceramics, these gestures become stereotyped and meaningless, but in a sensitively made pot this contact between maker and material can become a direct and moving experience that may be shared by users of the pot. Not only the forms which reveal themselves, but also the weight of the pot, the texture of the materials, and surface gesture provide an open door to understanding. First, however, we must overcome the inhibitions of our Western acculturation that cause us to feel knowledge by touch is immature, primitive, and even illegal. Among many other peoples, the hand is a live instrument of experience, used in daily life to hold, lift, grip, and explore. As a*

*tool for living, it becomes a tool for knowing.*[8]

The high value MacKenzie places on our sense of touch is particularly noticeable when comparing his pieces with those of other well-known vesselmakers. for example, the landscape patterns encircling the walls of many of Wayne Higby's stunning vessels, as alluring as they are, are meant to be seen, not touched. And although the surfaces of Richard DeVore's vessels are tantalizingly sensuous, the preciousness of his work inhibits our urge to touch them. Bennett Bean's emphasis on brilliant surface treatment over volume and of the visual over the useful is likewise alien to MacKenzie.

There is a third function MacKenzie's works perform that is shared by all artists—the communication of something of the artist himself. What this means to MacKenzie we may learn by listening to what he has said of Yi Dynasty ware:

*They are what I call nothing pots—that is, any competent potter can make them. But they have what I am looking for—a naturalness and a vitality, a sense of inner presence, an intensity which quickens the pieces and makes it more than just a utilitarian object. This seldom happens in my own work, but when it does, I hope I see it and that these qualities become a positive statement of communication between the user and myself.*[9]

And, as he has written elsewhere:

*There must enter into the work a sense of excitement and communication between maker and user....Some pots feel right and a person who is open will know them. If given time to absorb the inner nature of the work and its maker, this person will share in the creative act that produced the piece.*[10]

MacKenzie has been characterized by his students as open, generous, self assured, humble, articulate. These same characteristics are found in his pots. Although thrown on the wheeel, they are not symmetrical; there is always a unique thrust to a line, a profile, a lip. The work is sure but relaxed, revealing but subtle, with the result that one sees and feels where the artist picked it up, paddled it freely, or cut the profile. In brief, one experiences the presence of the potter.

Over the years, MacKenzie's pots have not changed very dramatically. This is due in part to their strong utilitarian nature, but more to the potter's primary concern for restrained modification. In this sense, MacKenzie is a true classicist, quietly exploring the terrain. He is not an exploiter of form or technique, nor does his work possess the explosive energy of a Voulkos. Perhaps it would be most appropriate to compare him to Braque, rather than Picasso. An early pioneer of Cubism, Braque reamined a cubist painter all of his creative life, thoroughly exploring its every possibility while holding onto his basic imagery. Picasso, by contrast, charged all over the artistic landscape.

Warren MacKenzie's works and thoughts have been a forceful influence on the field of ceramics for three decades. His dedication to the utilitarian vessel has spread throughout the country, in the studios of generations of his students, and he has peopled our counter tops and dining tables with innumerable common vessels of uncommon beauty. In this day of the microchip, when our every action and communication is as disembodied as an electronic impulse, it is a rare and valuable event to pick up and hold a MacKenzie pot.

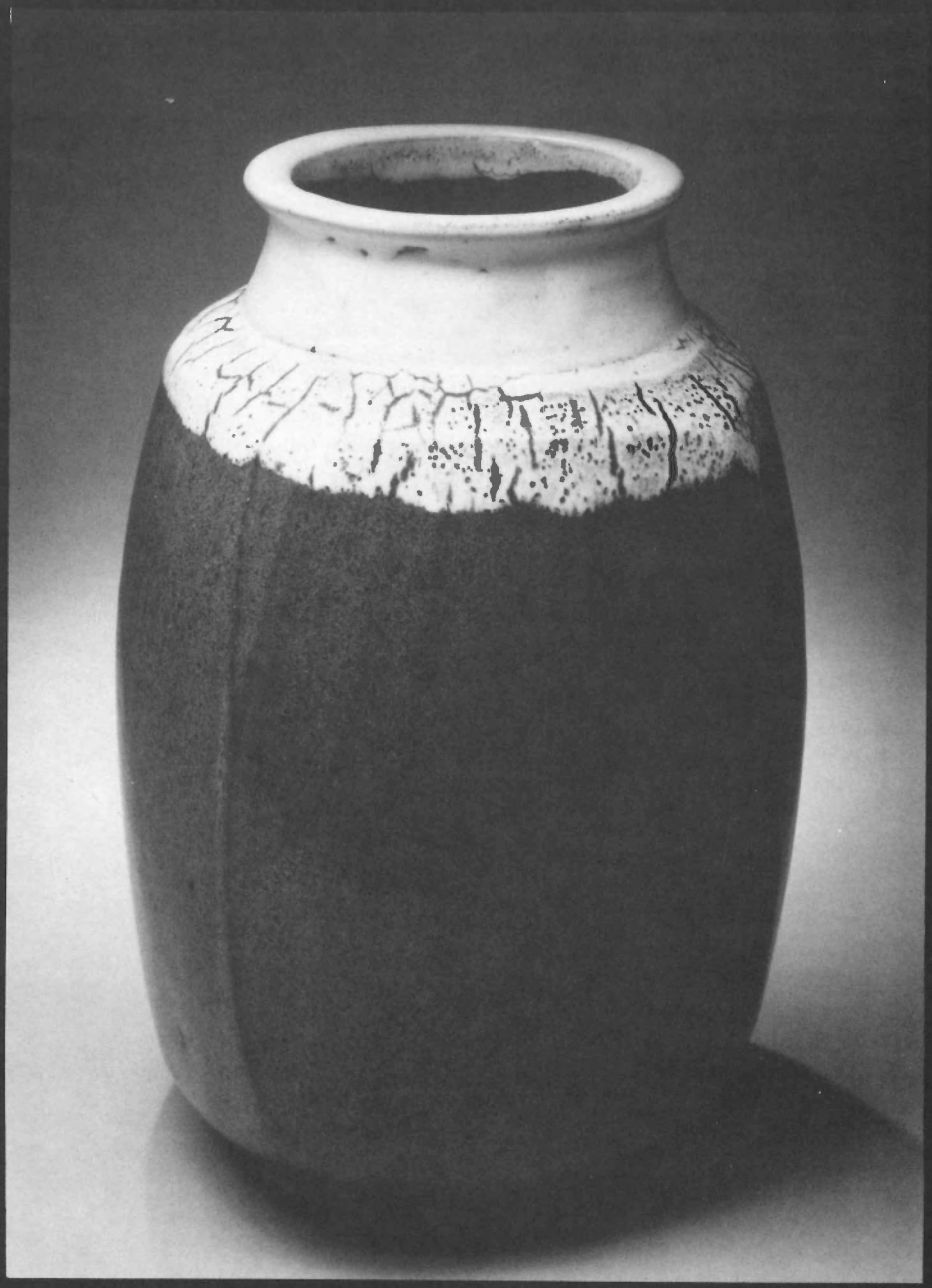
MacKenzie strongly believes that pottery should be a natural part of daily life, that utility and affordability should be combined with expressive form. He successfully meets the challenge that utility places on ceramics (it is one thing to make a handsome pot, it is another to make it functional as well). His vessels are quietly expressive of his humanistic philosophy and, like his pots, his affection lies with the middle, not the edges, in staying with the center, the core of vesselmaking on the potter's wheel.

1. *American Heritage Dictionary.*
2. *Oxford English Dictionary.*
3. *Romans* IX, 21.
4. Omar Khayyám, *The Rubiayat*, verses 83–85, as translated by Edward Fitzgerald.
5. William Shakespeare, *King Henry V.*
6. Judith Raunig-Graham, "Utilitarian Potter's Image as Artist Grows," University of Minnesota News Service, n.d.
7. Warren MacKenzie, "In Memorium," *NCECA Newsletter* vol. 3, no. 1 (1979), p. 3.
8. As found in *Minnesota Pottery: A Potter's View* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1981), p. 8.
9. In a letter from MacKenzie to Susan Peterson.
10. Warren MacKenzie, *Useful Pots* (Arvada, Colo.: Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities, 1981).

*Dale K. Haworth received his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa and is professor of art history of Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota, where he teaches courses in the history of ceramics, prints, ancient, Oriental, medieval, and twentieth-century art and directs the college's exhibition program. Karen F. Beall, for many years curator of fine prints at the Library of Congress, has published over fifteen articles, catalogues, and a book on European and American prints. She is currently research associate at Carleton College and a free-lance curator. Haworth and Beall are now completing a book on MacKenzie. All quotations of the artist are taken from conversations with the authors, unless otherwise indicated.*

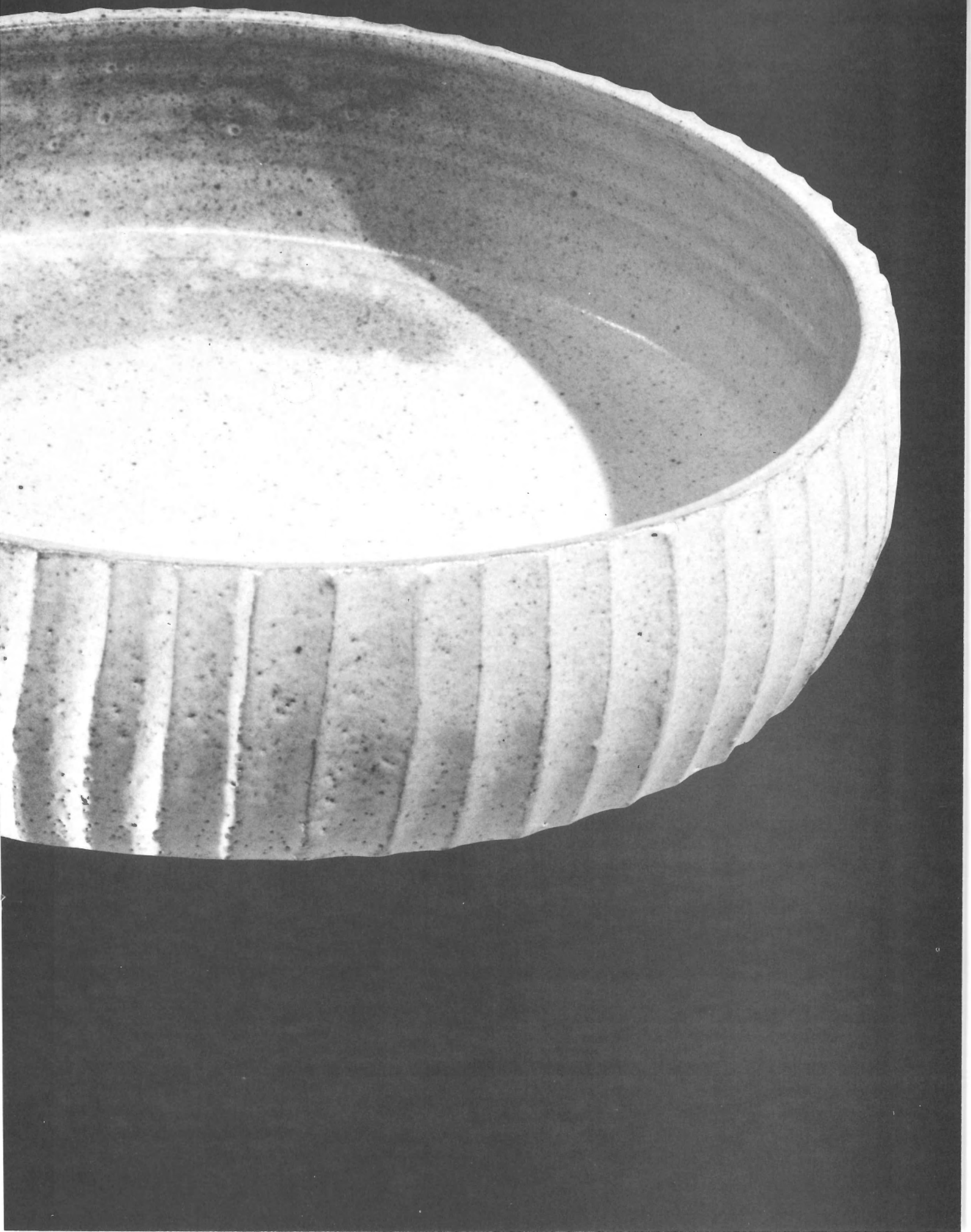
Fluted Vase *(1980), 13 3/4″ (35 cm) high, stoneware. Photo: Robert A. Grove.*

Vase *(1979), 10 1/4″ (26 cm) high, stoneware. Photo: Robert A. Grove.*



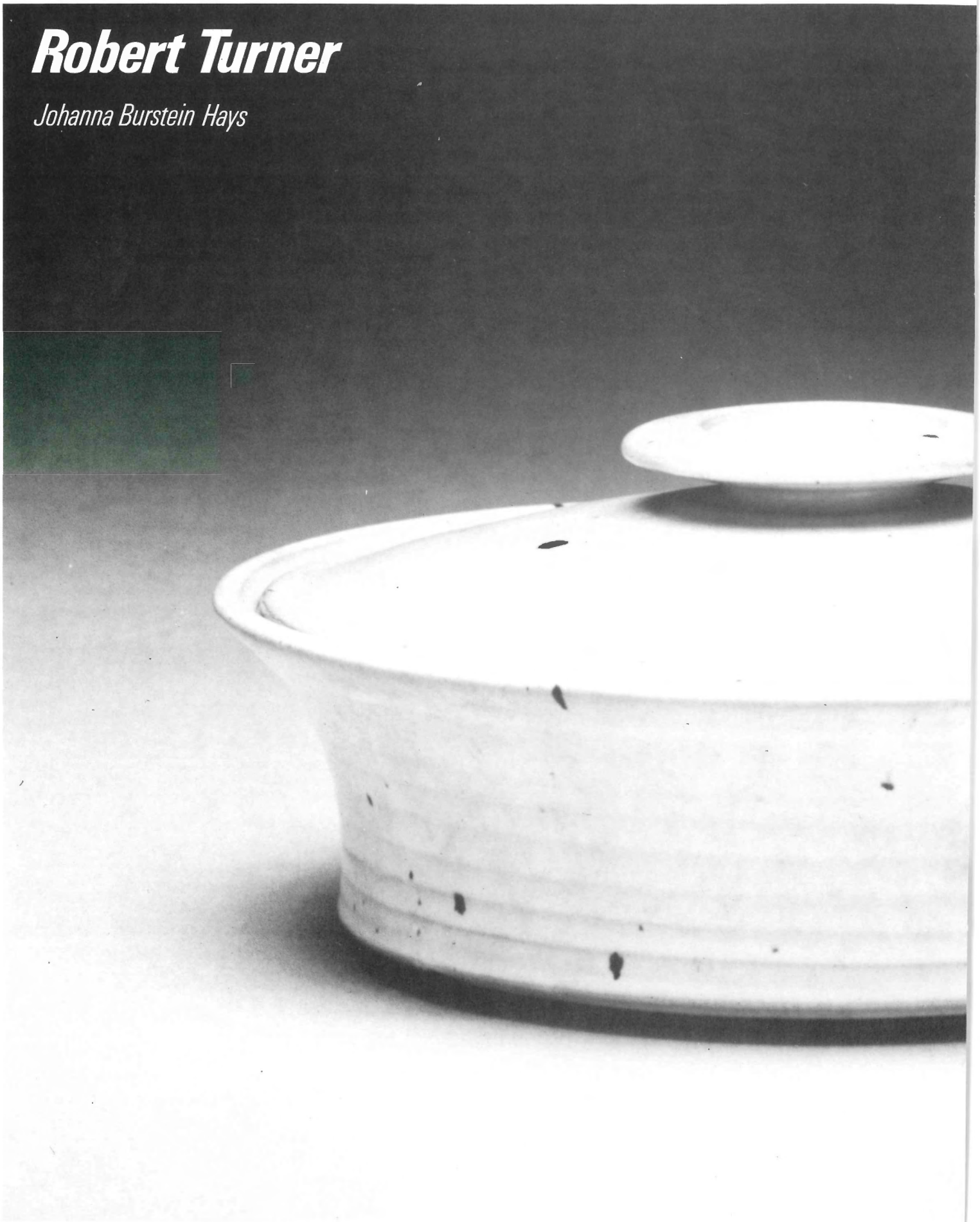
Bowl *(ca. 1982), 19 1/8" (48.6 cm) diameter, stoneware. Photo: Robert A. Grove.*

Fluted Bowl *(ca. 1983), 14 1/8" (35.9 cm) diameter, stoneware. Photo: Robert A. Grove.*



# Robert Turner

*Johanna Burstein Hays*



Casserole *(1957), 12" (30.5 cm) diameter, stoneware. Private collection. Photo: Steve Myers.*

*With clarity of rhythmic structure, grace forms a duality. Together they have a relation like that of body and soul. Clarity is cold, mathematical, inhuman, but basic and earthy. Grace is warm, incalculable, human, opposed to clarity, and like the air. Grace is not here used to mean prettiness; it is used to mean the play with and against the clarity of the rhythmic structure. The two are always present together in the best works of the time arts, endlessly, and life-givingly, opposed to each other.*[1]
John Cage

Robert Turner abandoned paint and canvas, turning to ceramics, because the substance of clay, the feel of it, was more compelling to him. Soon after, in 1949, he established the first pottery studio at Black Mountain College—that experimental outpost in North Carolina where John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Franz Kline, Paul Goodman, and many other exiles and natives sought to liberate art from its confining Western heritage. At the time of Turner's arrival, Black Mountain was still responding to the influence of Josef Albers, who had brought to its free and self-directed atmosphere an almost religious commitment to knowing the true nature of materials and their relationship to each other.[2] The results were extraordinary for all of the arts, including ceramics.

For Turner, the issues in need of exploration were these: the physical and aesthetic properties of clay itself, and how these properties could participate in a new relationship to the functional tradition of ceramics. Later in his career, as professor of ceramics at Alfred University, Turner was among those who developed a stoneware aesthetic that became synonymous with American ceramics and a major influence on succeeding generations of young potters: sparely adorned, yet innovative stoneware pots marked by the iron spottings and warm brown brushes of the reduction fire.

In spite of the elegant beauty and potent impact of these innovations, by the end of the sixties Turner felt he was responding to the aesthetic of another time. The reverence he felt for the Oriental culture, its forms and glazes, had brought him to a kind of perfection that he perceived as a "dead end." He says of this work:

*It was made to represent something I knew, but it was not the result of discovering—the becoming of a present experience in which it unfolds and evolves, where every part becomes alive in relation to every other part. That was what I needed to find....*[3]

Regarding this early work, it is worth remembering that what had become a personal dead end for Turner was, nevertheless, of great importance for ceramics in general. For in a country lacking its own ceramic traditions, potters like Turner, Peter Voulkos, and Bernard

Casserole *(1970), stoneware. Collection of the artist. Photo: Steve Myers.*

Jar *(1966), 22" (56 cm) high, stoneware. Collection of the artist. Photo: Steve Myers.*

Leach closed a cultural synapse between the air of reverence that has traditionally surrounded ceramics and the opportunities for experiment in this modern period. In his own work, Turner began to consciously search for an "environment" in which the unknown could happen, an arena grounded in his own experience of watching and feeling the process of throwing.

*One is always responding to the clay. You do one thing and it suggests the next....A pot works when two things come together in a particular way that is unexpected. It brings us to the place we wanted to go, but didn't know how to get to. It's a quantum jump into the unexpected and irrational.*

The vocabulary of the functional vessel gave way to a more specific presence—the record of the act of throwing—as well as to more universal qualities—the spatial geometry of the vessel. The "unexpected and irrational" emerged for him when he began removing the freshly thrown form from the wheel and altering it. "The altered form could be a truth one could respond to. It became quivery, at the edge of form, and became very present. It talked back; it responded."
Preconceived intentions gave way to intuition. Turner shifted his attention to the balance of forces between interior and exterior, to the way a specific spatial form responds to individual pressures, as well as to gravity.

*I want to deal with things implicit in that pot and make them real—to bring myself to a place where I do what invites being done....I can only plan the gesture or the notion I have in mind with some structure as an environment in which it can occur.*

The formal issues of the vessel start with the interplay of interior and exterior surface—the rhythmic structure. Inside, a Turner vessel shows the throwing marks of the hand that formed it on the potter's wheel. Outside, the texture of the glazed and sandblasted surface is smooth, soft, and, contradictorily, rocklike. This almost geologically timeless exterior is marked by the immediacy of intentional cuts, pushes, and additions to the form. Each particular form integrates intuitive response and learned skill; each conforms to and deviates from the geometric purity of the cylinder. Within the vessel vocabulary, there are infinite variations on the cylinder as an abstract form. Formal relationships of foot to shoulder to belly to rim—the structure, the "environment" where intuition mediates between feeling and process—are free of specific utilitarian or ritual structures. Here, three decades of experience at the wheel combine with a trained eye and intelligence to explore the subtle half-steps between statements of form. Each curve and dent must possess its own integrity, yet lend itself harmoniously to the whole.

Dome *(1981), 10" (25.4 cm) high, stoneware. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Paul Shandling, Chicago. Photo: Steve Myers.*

Circle-Square *(1977), 10" (25.4 cm) high, stoneware. Collection James Ropiquet Schmidt, St. Louis. Photo: Lester Mertz.*

For Turner, clay bears a specific relationship to the land, and the feelings evoked by certain places inform and inspire the work. This awareness of *place* as a twofold aspect of the vessel led him to an extended exploration of sites in Africa and the American Southwest. Turner was seeking an experience of time that bridged recorded and unrecorded time—an experience of timelessness if you will.

*When the pot reaches the thrown form, it permits the next act: a sense of particular identity. All are landscapes. Their size is their reality. They take me to the ways things exist powerfully in space for long, long periods of time.*

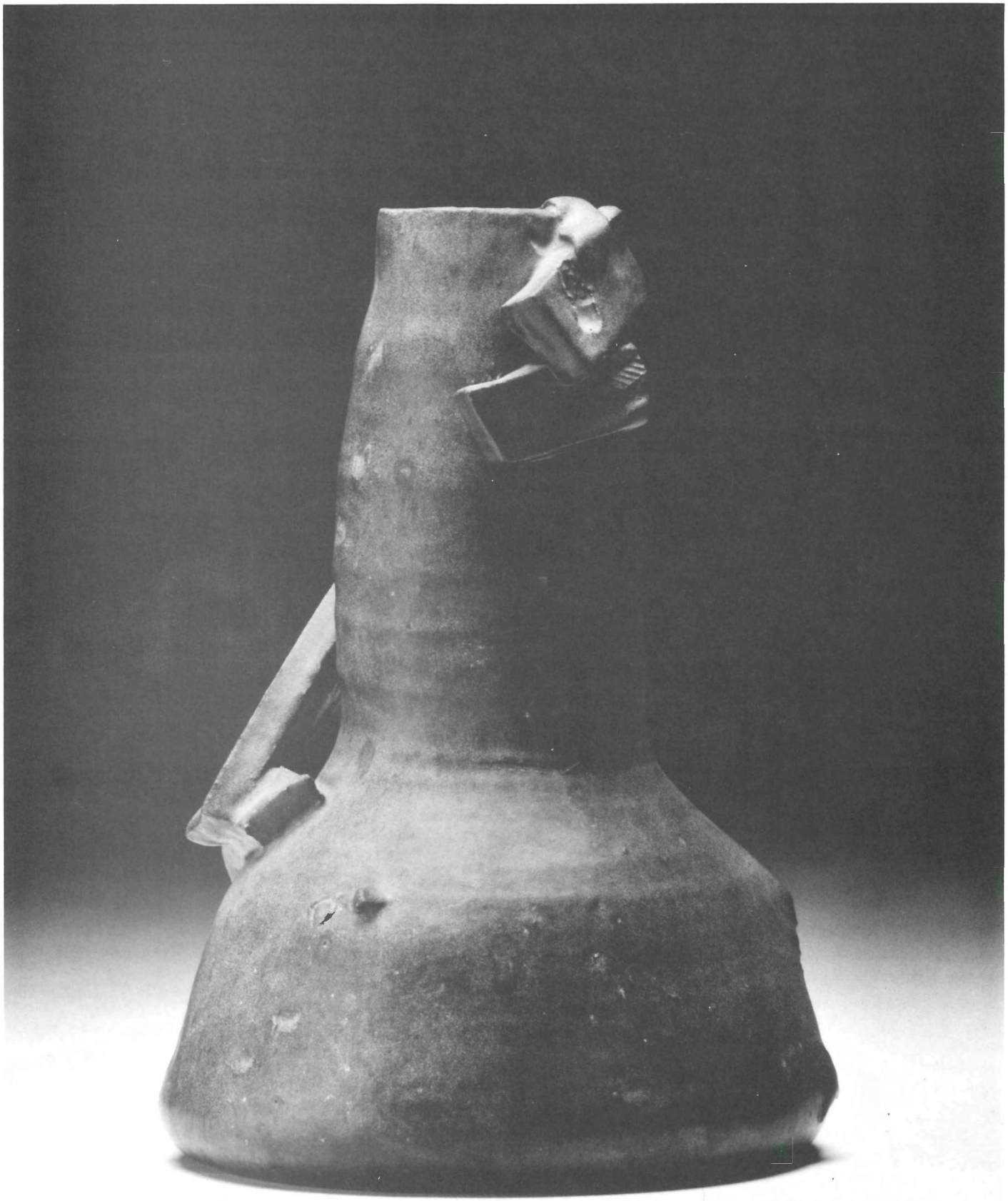
But it is not so much the evidence as it is the *experience* of timelessness that Turner seeks in his work. "The pots I make today are markers that incorporate experiences that have been important to me."
The aesthetic freedom offered by the nonfunctional vessel is appealing, but it can easily go awry as freedom is taken for license. A Robert Turner pot is a rare example of freedom won, not taken. The quiet grace of it carries the eye and hand through transitions from inside to outside, encompassing the particular and the whole simultaneously. Its dramatic presence and clarity provide a focus for extended meditation on the simple beauty of a form that respects and acknowledges its manifestations across all cultures, but remains the unique statement of one human being at one moment in time.

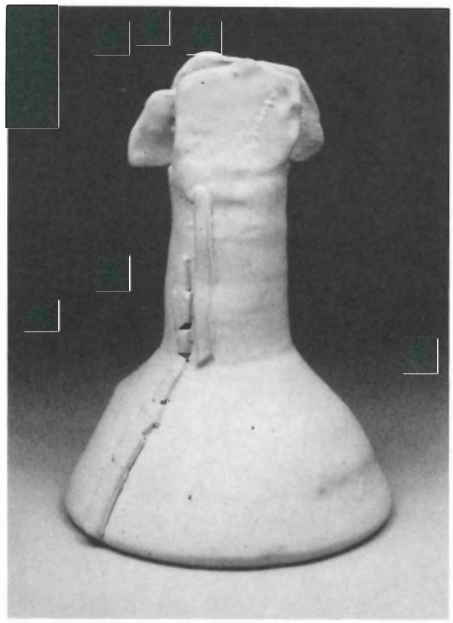
1. John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 91.
2. Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall* (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday & Company, 1980), p. 30.
3. All quotations of the artist are taken from "Born Remembering," *Studio Potter* vol. 10, no. 2 (June 1982).



*Robert Turner is represented by Exhibit A Gallery, Chicago; his work will be the subject of upcoming exhibitions at Exhibit A; the Milwaukee Art Museum; and Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia.*

*Johanna Burstein Hays is an artist, critic, and contributing editor to* Artweek.



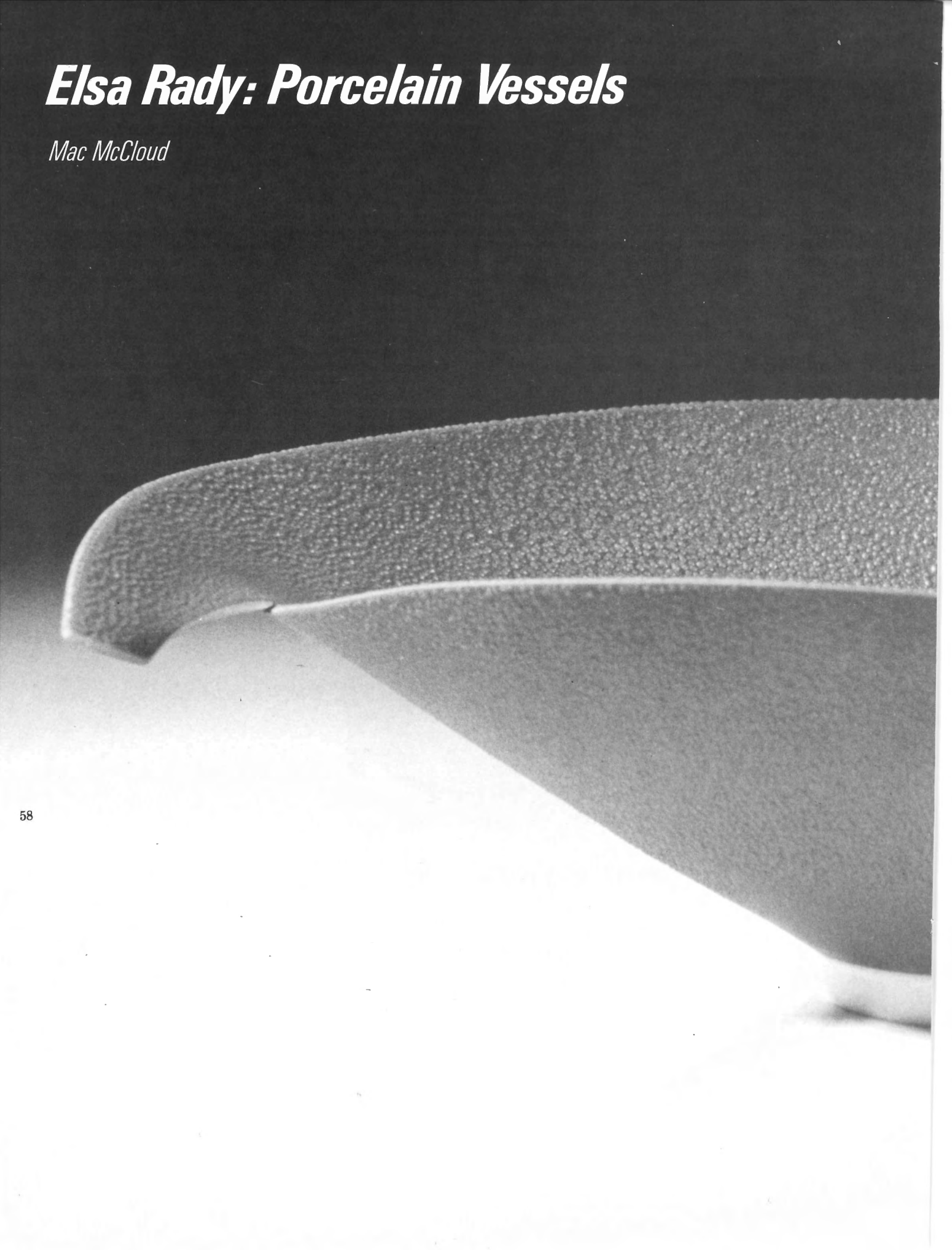


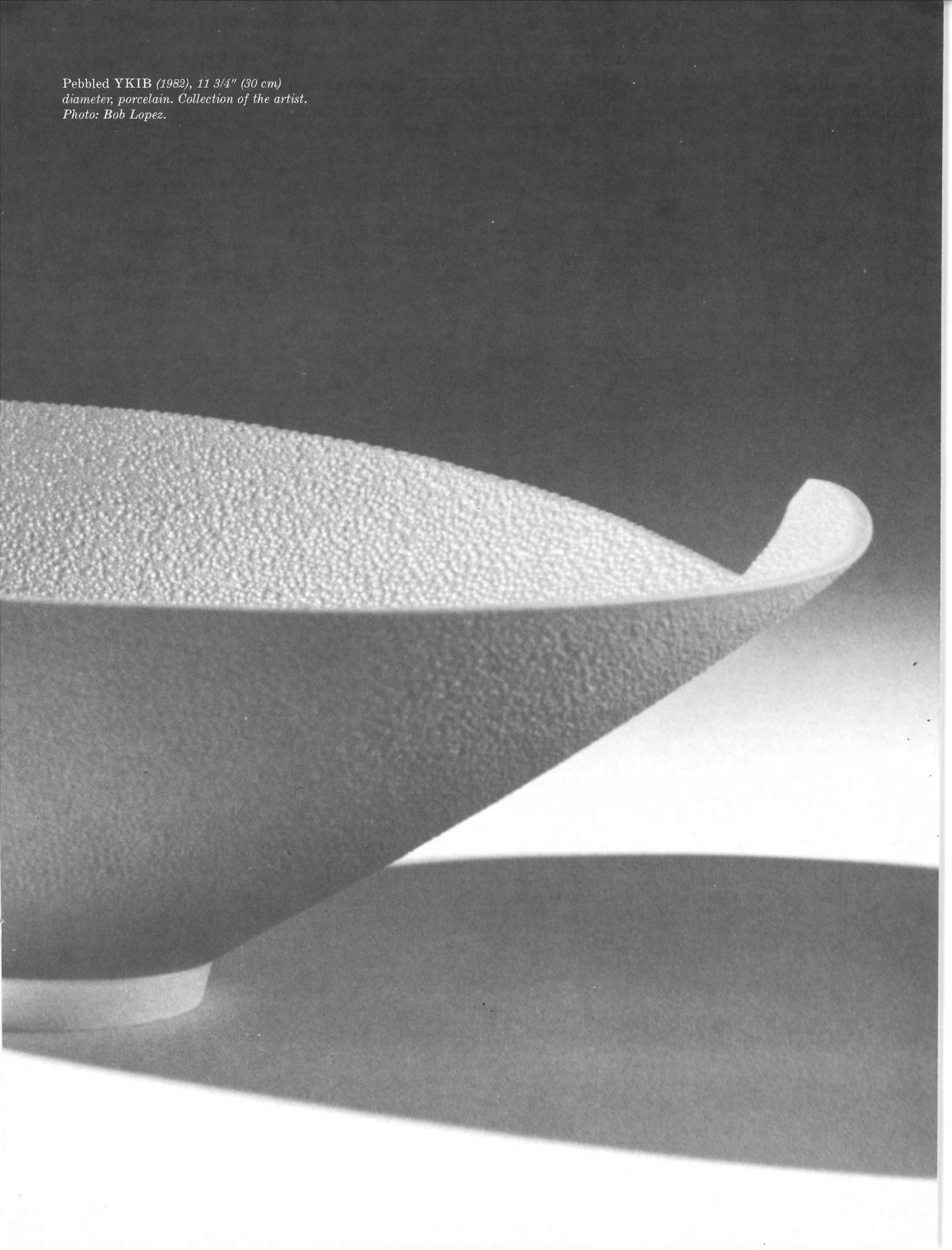
Akan *(1982), 12″ (30.5 cm) high, stoneware. Private collection. Courtesy Exhibit A, Chicago. Photo: Steve Myers.*

Ife *(1982), 10″ (30.5 cm) high, stoneware. Private collection. Courtesy Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Steve Myers.*

# *Elsa Rady: Porcelain Vessels*

*Mac McCloud*





Pebbled YKIB *(1982), 11 3/4" (30 cm) diameter, porcelain. Collection of the artist. Photo: Bob Lopez.*

The connecting filament that underlies and binds together the porcelain vessels of Elsa Rady is a lucid insistence on the utter purity of formal design. In the distilled single-mindedness of each piece, she has pared down to three the aesthetic elements she chooses to address: intense, uniform color; fastidiously controlled modulations of a thinspun, conical form; consummated by the artful flourish of an outspinning, slender, notched lip. In her latest work, she has augmented the monolithic refinement of her single pieces with a series of *Conjugations*—groups of two or three shapes sequentially organized on polished slabs of dark granite. The result is a statement of austere elegance, concentrated deliberations on the spatial relationships of formalist objects. Splendidly modern, the sensuous colors are intended to dazzle us, while the precisely intuitive placement of the containers and the space between them embodies the movement of dancers.

The roots of Rady's expression lie in the direction of the *recherché*. It is as if we were being transported swiftly backward in time to the period of Art Deco, that mythical era of exacting ornament and complex, inventive design. Rady's vases do not mimic or copy that fascinating epoch as much as they remember it and, with exacting contemporary skills, remake it. The Elsa Rady vessel achieves presence as an object without flaw or blemish: transfixed in its gleaming smooth dynamics, a flowing envelope of a single radiant color, luminous with reflection and the shape of movement. Rady has fixed on the character and possibilities of porcelain with an unerring and sophisticated eye, and her hand captures that plasticity in the fabrication of an accurate, exacting ideal. The result is a striking declaration of artistic identity. *Conjugations* reveal Rady's search for the absolute, the flawless. The radiant glazes declare these vessels—immaculate inverted cones poised like museum pieces—to be almost mythological or anthropological objects, even before they are sold. Their idealization has been focused to such a degree that I was hesitant, I discovered, to murmer the word "pottery" in their proximity.

This very perfection, it must be pointed out, is their greatest strength. In the most profound fashion, Rady seeks to redefine ornament, to invest it with intensity, to endow it once more with its vitality as an icon, the signal artifact that marks and invigorates our social lives and domiciles. Balanced on their waxy marble plinths as poised and self-contained as acrobats, these containers announce to their surrounds the prestigious taste of an assertive, urbane personality. At the same time, standing there beside them on their smooth pedestals, is an aura of carefully measured distance, a look of remoteness, even of impersonality. Rady's aesthetic has assimilated more than a little of the mechanical, the geometry of the centripetal wheel, the machine shape that pervades the imagery of modern living. Indeed, at first sight these containers recall to mind the modern industrial technique of spun aluminum or stainless steel bowls. Echoing that motion, Rady's vessels flare outward with consummate and driven ease, smooth curved walls rising in spiral turning flight. The exquisite shapes suggest exotic rotary parts, fragile serrated gears caught in frozen motion, flying wings, whirling propellers. Our association with the shapes of spun metal is quickly transformed into the experience of a perfectly turned ceramic object that airily revolves about a vertical axis and flings its sinuously carved and delicate lip into the receptivity of space. The volumes themselves possess a greater degree of abstraction than do industrial wares; they can be seen as thin sheets of overlapping, curvilinear planes. Subtle singular colors, the hues of Rady's world, finalize the difference. These velvety matte blacks, radiant greens, turquoise, copper pinks, and reds demonstrate the finesse of the impeccable ceramic glaze as applied by an expert.

*Brushed Flight* is volume torn apart: the lower section is "vessel," a deep concavity of space, full, volumetric; the upper half is cut away as volume escapes into space. A superb formalist, Rady orchestrates the vibrating tensions between the three-dimensional and the two-dimensional carried by her solitary forms and the spatial relationships and the elements of repetition and sequence in the *Conjugations*. The granite slab support for these *Conjugations* is more than a traditional stand. A polished horizontal slab, sometimes cut in a pleasant arc, it frames and lifts the slender conical containers, transporting them almost as if they were floating. Slab and vessel comprise a composition: buoyant, set geometries enclosed in their selected space, seeking precision, intuitive exactness, and history. The *Conjugations* series expands the horizon of this ceramic artist and provides a fascinating insight into her expressive needs and achievements. Perfection may be the unattainable, but every artist strives for it. It is this search, the intensity of the effort and the maturity of the artist, which offers insight and appreciation in the response of a sensitive audience. Rady's statement in her recent work is that of an artist who has stripped her work of everything that is not essential to it. It is this formal essence that endows these works with the sense of being "universal," idiosyncratic, ritual object rather than functional container. It is that quality which speaks to a human need for order, logic, and purified elegance as a requisite component of our hurried and complex lives.

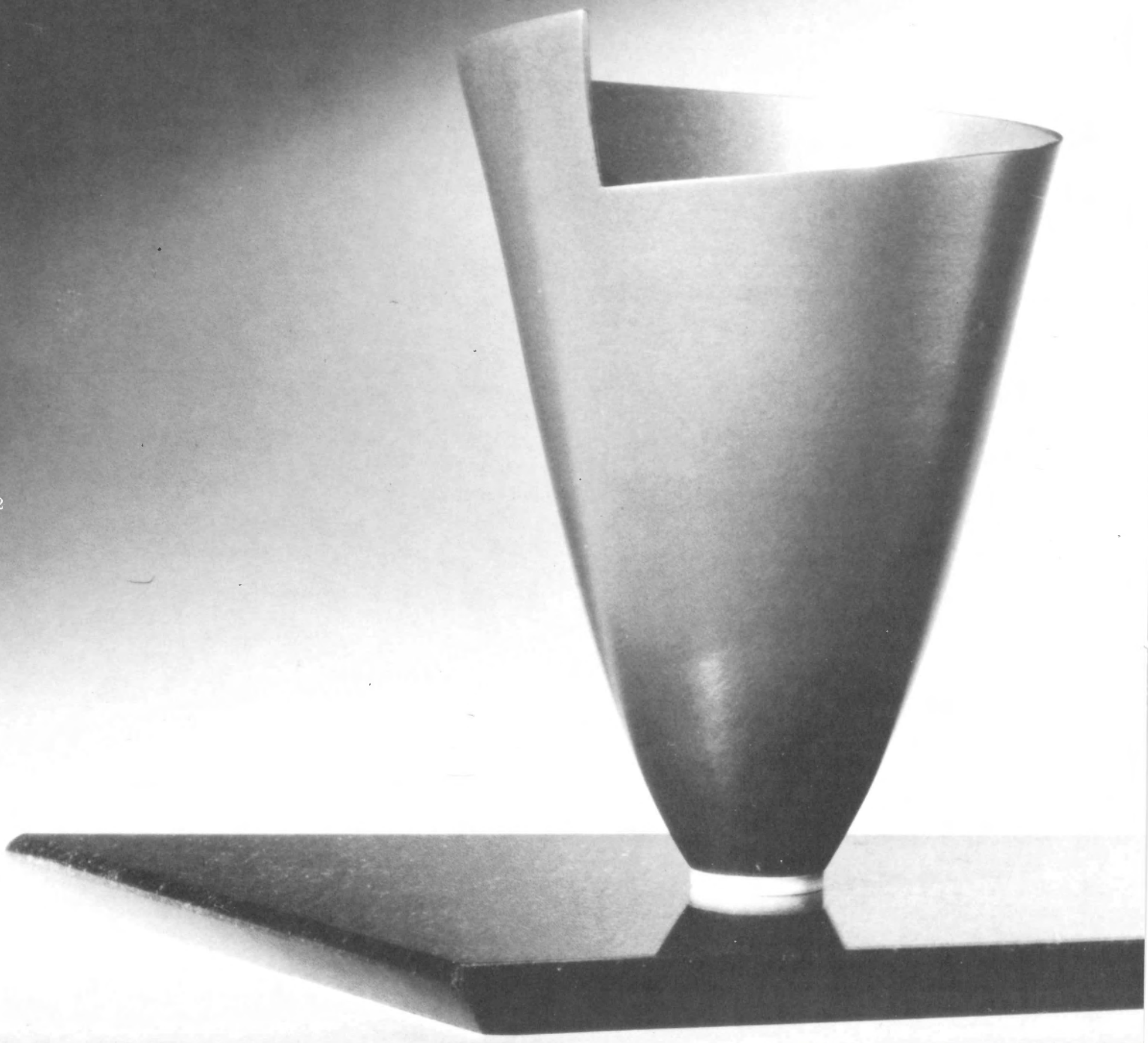
*Elsa Rady, represented by Janus Gallery, Los Angeles, and Maria Friedrich, Boston, will be included in two upcoming exhibitions: "Pacific Connections," organized by the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, which opens in Tokyo, Japan, before touring the United States; and an exhibition of contemporary American ceramics organized by Garth Clark, which will become part of the permanent collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*

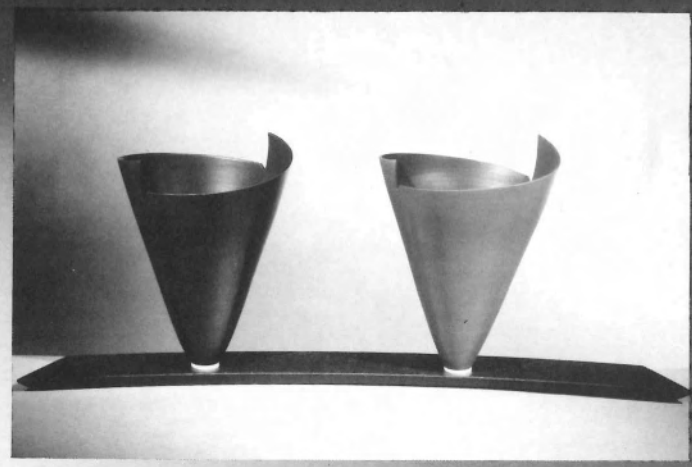
*Mac McCloud is the pen name of Malcolm McClain, veteran ceramist, closet poet, and fervent writer of art reviews. McClain has taught ceramics at California State University, Los Angeles, for twenty years and lives in L.A.'s nearby mountains.*

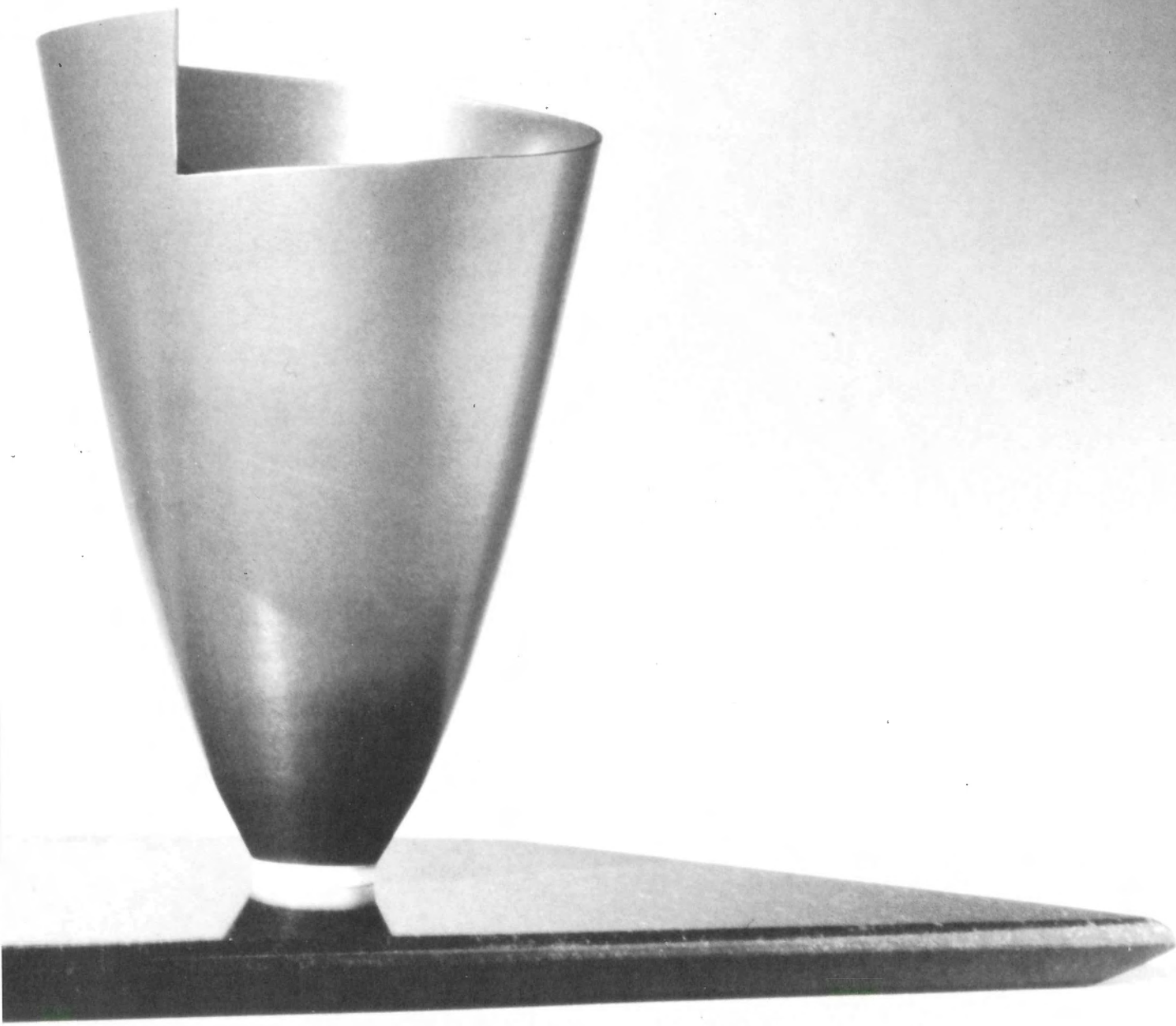
Blushed Flight *(1983), 8 3/4" (22.3 cm) high, porcelain. Collection of the artist. Photo: Andrew Craig.*

Conjugation: Two Right Angles *(1983), tallest 9 1/4" (23.5 cm) high, porcelain. Collection Judith Drake, Kansas City. Courtesy Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City. Photo: Andrew Craig.*

Conjugation: Double Angles *(1984), 11 1/4" (28.6 cm) high, porcelain. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Larry Horner, New York. Photo: Andrew Craig.*







# Exhibitions

**Bull from the Sea** *(1983), porcelain. Collection Joseph Monsen, Seattle. Courtesy Garth Clark Gallery. Photo: Roger Schreiber.*

# Rudy Autio

## Matthew Kangas

It has taken a while, but criticism of Rudy Autio's work finally seems to have caught up with the pace of his considerable achievements of the past few years. The more that is written about him by art critics, the less important the entire issue of the "vessel" appears to be. But then, contrary to the theme of this issue of *American Ceramics,* most American art critics who have sometimes written about clay never accepted the assumptions about the vessel that others took such pains to assert. This has been especially true for Autio and his other colleagues of the Pacific Northwest sculptural ceramics movement: Patti Warashina, Howard Kottler, Mike Moran, Anne Perrigo, and others.

A brief review of the critical writings on Autio of the past three or four years reveals a much more probing interest on the part of those who write about the Montana-born artist. Reviewing Autio's 1982 Okun-Thomas Gallery exhibit, St. Louis critic Michael G. Rubin made the point by concentrating on color and form in Autio and aligned him with Matisse and the *fauves:*

*Described as a "vessel,"* [Blue Running Figure, Green Running Figure] *its principal function is sculptural, perfectly direct in its use of slab-wall construction and aggressive in its singularity.*

He adds:

*More important...are Autio's powerful and penetrating clay constructions, structures with bulging walls that undulate into a wonderful clarity of physical movement.*

and concludes:

*While the female figures that decorate these clay forms are convincing, the vital experience of Autio's work is not to be found within the realm of drawing and painting but rather in his quintessentially abstract sculpture.*[1]

Had Rubin seen Autio's early, completely abstract untitled sculptures of the 1960s, his point would have been further reinforced.

Not that Autio is in accord with Rubin. Questioned on the Missouri critic's presumptions, he answered:

*No, I wouldn't agree. Form more important? I think it's a union of painting and sculpture.*[2]

Here, the Finnish-American artist echoes the opinions of leading Finnish critics, who tend to see his art as a fusion of two- and three-dimensional media.[3] Thus, here and in Europe, growing opinion about Autio's approach to ceramics as a mixture of contemporary painting and sculpture has gradually supplanted earlier, medium-bound views that narrowly categorized him as a potter or a vesselmaker.

His objects are only vessels to the extent that they are hollow, and most have no openings whatsoever. They carry none of the pretentious symbolic meaning often associated with the "vessel as metaphor" school of thought. In fact, West Coast critics, such as Regina Hackett, have insisted that Autio's relation to the vessel is one of satire or parody:

*Autio has fun with the vessel form. Extended arms could be lids or wings and in* Beauty and the Beast *two bountiful, left-leaning breasts protruding into the air could be the vase's front handles....The figures aren't incised into the pots, they* are *the pots.*[4]

It is this indivisibility of image and form, subject matter and shape, that ultimately removes any emphasis on the vessel for its own sake. As the retrospective made clear, this occurred from an early date onward. The seminal *Large Floor Vase* (also known as *Flesh Pot,* 1963) has the largest inner void of any of his pieces, but its significance has more to do with meshing the roundness of the pot with the anatomical roundness of the female figures, which in turn were based on a two-dimensional source—the woodcuts of the Japanese printmaker Munakata that Autio had received as a gift from Peter Voulkos.

Whether one regards Autio's work from Rubin's point of view ("abstract sculpture"), Hackett's ("fun with the vessel"), or Autio's own ("a combined operation of drawing and painting"), it is increasingly clear that as he emerges into the contemporary art mainstream, out of the constricting yet historic limitations of traditional American ceramics, so the discourse surrounding his art shall take as its impetus those aspects that refer outwardly to the world of art at large rather than inwardly to the waning, special-case vocabulary that continues to stultify clay criticism today.

1. Michael G. Rubin, "Rudy Autio Is One of the Best Contemporary Abstractionists," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* February 27–28, 1982.
2. Matthew Kangas, interview in *Rudy Autio Retrospective.* (Missoula: University of Montana, 1983), p. 22.
3. See Gretta Baltscheffskij, "Rudy Autio," *Saviseppo,* March 1981; Mauno Takala, "Takkatuli ja talvinen luonto miellyttävät," *Lehti Ruovesi,* April 29, 1981.
4. Regina Hackett, "Rudy Autio Has Moved from Rough Edges to the Whimsical," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* January 13, 1984.



*Rudy Autio's retrospective exhibition was most recently on view at the American Craft Museum, New York (September 14–November 3, 1984). A catalogue is available for $12.50 postpaid from the museum at International Paper Plaza, 77 West 45 Street, New York, NY 10036. A solo exhibition of Autio's current work was simultaneously on view at Garth Clark Gallery, New York (September 11–October 6, 1984).*

*Matthew Kangas is a free-lance critic and curator living in Seattle. He is the author of over 450 reviews, essays, and catalogues and has a special interest in contemporary ceramics and glass.*

# Kirk Mangus

## Martha Keller

Although none of his works are useful or functional in the strict sense, Kirk Mangus adamantly claims they have to do with the uses of art and vision, with the fact that artwork can simply be "useful to look at." But just how is this so? And how does it apply to Mangus's work? Mangus thinks of the pot as image, an image inseparable from its sacred use as a food container. So when he draws on or carves into its vessel wall, it's not to use it as a challenging drafting surface; rather, it's to see this added imagery as part of the total concept of pot as sacred image. He intends that his work feed into this rich historical context of the pot and the pot's use. Further, with his highly developed consciousness of visual "use," Mangus ties into the broadest possible sense of the term—the use of vision as information processor at both the sensory and the cognitive levels. His art exercises and celebrates that vital use of vision in everyday life.

All of Mangus's work is drawn on. Whether vessel or plate or pillar or bottle, the calligraphy works into and with the shape. Mangus's early experience in printmaking explains to some extent why the line is as strong as it is, why it speaks as it does. Its "voice" laughs, hums, guffaws, whistles, and shouts by turns, as life-prone as any street music you might imagine. And the continuum of its melodic line must radiate in part from a continuum of process. Mangus works in primal back-to-the-land fashion, collecting clay from riverbeds and firing his work in the wood-burning kiln he built himself. His torrential street music—flora and fauna tumbling together—resembles nothing so much as the jungle of images found on the walls of Indian temples. Yet what really holds it together? In part, it is the character of line itself. Line here is a gymnast, full of attending, concentrated in its leaping and tumbling. Although his three-dimensional forms look okay, easy and pliant and right, line is Mangus's life force, pressing forward, impatient, curious, gliding by turns. Some continuity is supplied by the wall of the vessel, in the endless recurrence and revolution of its roundness.

Mangus is obviously intrigued by drawing on a three-dimensional surface and, as anyone knows who's tried it, it ain't easy. A superior sort of spatial adaptation is required, sensing the curve of form and adapting the moving line to it. The real challenge comes when the curve turns sharply and the artist can't see what's coming around it; he has to work blind, relying on his gut knowledge of drawing. So it is in the tall pillar figure, *Another Blonde.* The drawing of the figure changes radically as the curve turns, dissolving into a white cloudy ground containing enigmatic, small shapes. The pillar is a ziggurat, a series of five semi-vessels rising stepwise that ends at the top in a cone: pinnacle and pin-head. You might think the pointed apex would lend a rising, lift-off feeling, but it doesn't, perhaps because of the stepwise breaks below. The series of breaks in the stacked sections and the somewhat narrow radius (generating the radical curve) tease the viewer with their ambiguity. You simply can't see what's going on without circling them again and again. The breaks, the ziggurat shapes, are what really distinguish these figure works from those of Rudy Autio, to whom Mangus owes an obvious debt. And they work as a plus and a minus, so far as the overall success of the form goes. They give a sense of moving through stages or phases, but they interrupt the flow of the figure form as well. While you have a sense of episodic narrative, the actual story line is unclear. Is the figure engaged in some kind of work? Producing something? Is the connotation sexual, demonstrating fecundity or fertility: the female as life-bearing vessel? The difficulty here is that the " vessel" implication in these figure forms seems vestigial.

The calligraphy of the smaller vessels, such as *Boy Jar,* works more coherently simply because the curving arc of the vessel's surface is gentler. The image is less difficult to read and therefore seems more integrated. The calligraphy, carved into the surface rather than painted on it, coheres with the vessel since both are three-dimensional and share the same surface glaze. Further, in such vessels the incised lines flow in clusters, in rhythmic series, giving the surface a vibrating aliveness. Yet, although these works read more clearly as vessel, although they display a more coherent gestalt of surface and vessel "image," I prefer the aesthetic of the figure works: they're more daring, the line is bolder, gutsier, and brings out the earthy character of the clay so that the concept "clay vessel" is confirmed, paradoxically, through the character of the painted line. Also, the stepwise shape, while not all that coherent as a vessel, moves the viewing eye in interesting ways; the diagonal line of the steps can compress or expand one's vision as the eye travels up and down the contour edge, pulsing against the drawn line.

Both vessel types, whether carved or drawn on with a brush, are anthropomorphic. In the incised ones, the figure seems to hide within the screen of the vessel surface; in the ziggurat, against all the odds set by the formalized shape, the vestigial vessel itself becomes figurative, due to the celebratory vigor, the visual use, of Mangus's feeling for line.

*Work by Kirk Mangus has been exhibited at Yaw Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan; Ree Schonlau Gallery, Omaha; and The Massillon Museum, Ohio.*

*Martha Keller is a painter, an art columnist for the* Ann Arbor News, *and a free-lance critic who has written for the* New Art Examiner, Heresies, *and other journals.*

Demon Vase *and* Man and Insect *(1984), tallest 11″ (28 cm) high, earthenware.*

Blonde and Bug *(1984), 19″ (48.3 cm) diameter, earthenware.*

Three Japanese Ladies Visiting Athens
*(1983), 19" (48.3 cm) high, earthenware.*
*Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York.*

# Betty Woodman

## James B. Cobb

Painting is not art, but merely a convention in which certain social and cultural activities take place. Likewise, ceramics is not in itself pottery, but rather a process using a plastic material fused by energy to secure its form. Thus, in its long tradition, ceramics has taken many forms, notably architecture, vessel, sculpture, and painting. The last three are evident in Betty Woodman's work individually and in various combinations.

Woodman's best-shaped vessels are her well-known *Pillow Pitchers*. Bulging with internal volume, they reveal visually the space they contain physically. These pots are animated by large handles, long spouts, and thick seams that clearly indicate we would have to exert ourselves to use them. They are decorated by splashes and daubs of color that are oddly amorphic, which neither clarify the shape of the pot nor distract us from it.

Vessel and sculpture meet in *Ziggurat Napkin Holder*, with its stepped silhouette. Sculpture is seldom life size in Woodman's work; rather, we see small-size models of things. In *Three Okinawan Ladies*—where figure is dominant because the three anthropomorphic pots are "dressed" in colors—the "ladies" are quite small. As three pots, however, they are neither small nor models of ladies, and it is this mixing of forms (sculpture and vessel), identities (pots and ladies), and size (conceptual and visual) that makes this piece interesting.

Several years ago, Woodman began using the wall as a support for tiles, murals, and environments. More recently, she has employed the wall to support shelves laden with pots, as with *Italian Shelf*, in which vessels are arrayed on clay or wooden shelves whose edges follow the contour of the ensemble of pots. Similarly, in other works the pots' silhouettes are echoed where the shelf meets and rises up the wall behind them. Here we find a combination of vessel (pots), sculpture (in the use of actual objects—the shelves—as well as the pots as ideographic statues), and "picture making" (the shadow of the pots on the wall).

Woodman employs a number of painting devices in her work, which I shall discuss one by one. The first of these, surface decoration, takes two forms: one in the manner of the T'ang dynasty, where color is applied irrespective of shape; the other gestural. The first refers to a historical period in ceramics, the other to expressionist painting. In both cases, the shapes of the objects are unrelated to the graphic identity and the expressive hues of the decoration.

The second pictorial device is projection of an image, as when we see the silhouettes of the pots echoed on wall plaques above and behind them. This is rare in ceramics and affords interesting possibilities, which are here not completely successful. For one does not know if the artist's projections are meant to create a picture plane or whether they are instead the pots' surfaces "opened up" or spread out to form a two-dimensional plaque—as is the case with some Indian art of the Northwest coast, for example.

A pseudo picture plane is created in some works by dividing a tableau—a tray holding cups, for example—along its length and decorating the two sides of the work differently. Once again, Woodman does not seize on the possibilities for illusionary space (overlapping planes, cubistic surface and volume analysis, synthetic forms) or the opportunities for composition. It is in her use of allusion that she is most successful pictorially. *Three Greek Boys Go to the Orient*, for example, combines kinesthetically convincing anthropomorphic pottery with a descriptive title. The title in turn indicates a narrative that is borne out by the form of the piece itself, which combines Greek and Far Eastern motifs. Because such titles *are* so narrative, Woodman would do well to incorporate them into the work itself.

Woodman began her career in ceramics as a follower of Far Eastern aesthetic principles, but soon found Mediterranean and Near Eastern traditions as compelling. Much of Woodman's work must be understood in the context of combining these culturally different traditions, as when she employs T'ang glazing on Italian folk pottery shapes. There is an arresting quality about these combinations because the traditions involved have different, incompatible purposes, here juxtaposed for a sophisticated viewer. Far Eastern aesthetics, for example, are very graphic formally (compare their textiles, prints, and gardens, as well as ceramics), often to the point that visual form and the expression of cultural values takes precedence over utilitarian requirements. Mediterranean and Near Eastern vessels, on the other hand, are primarily utilitarian; their forms are shaped for storage and their proportions vary greatly in order to fit their purpose. The result is that Oriental ceramics are usually refined in shape while Mediterranean pots have large feet, massive necks, and/or wide lips. Woodman is following the Western cosmopolitan practice of combining exotic traditions with familiar ones. Europeans have been doing this since their earliest explorations of the globe in search of materials and commerce; in ceramics, the practice is more recent. The challenge to Woodman and her contemporaries is to combine forms and culturally developed motifs so that the result is *significant*, for each time a form is made, a cosmos is implied.

*Betty Woodman's ceramics were on view at Max Protetch Gallery, New York, and more recently at Garth Clark Gallery, Los Angeles.*
*James B. Cobb is a sculptor and ceramist living in New York who teaches at Parsons School of Design, New York University, and Hunter College.*

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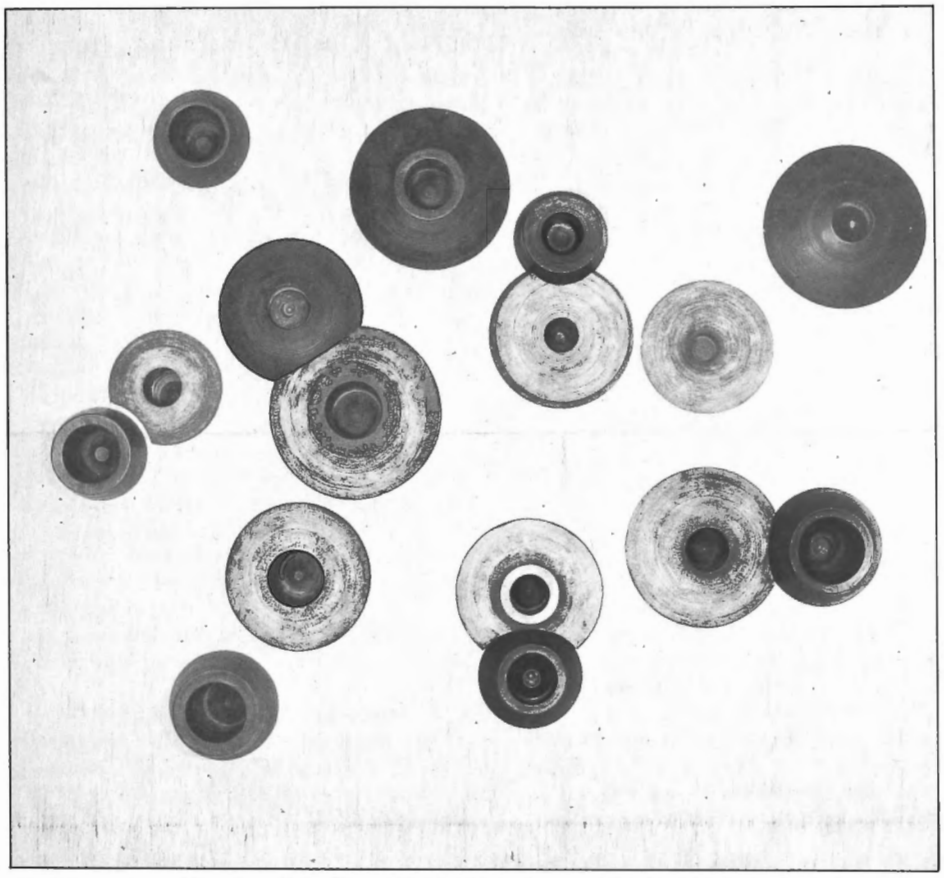

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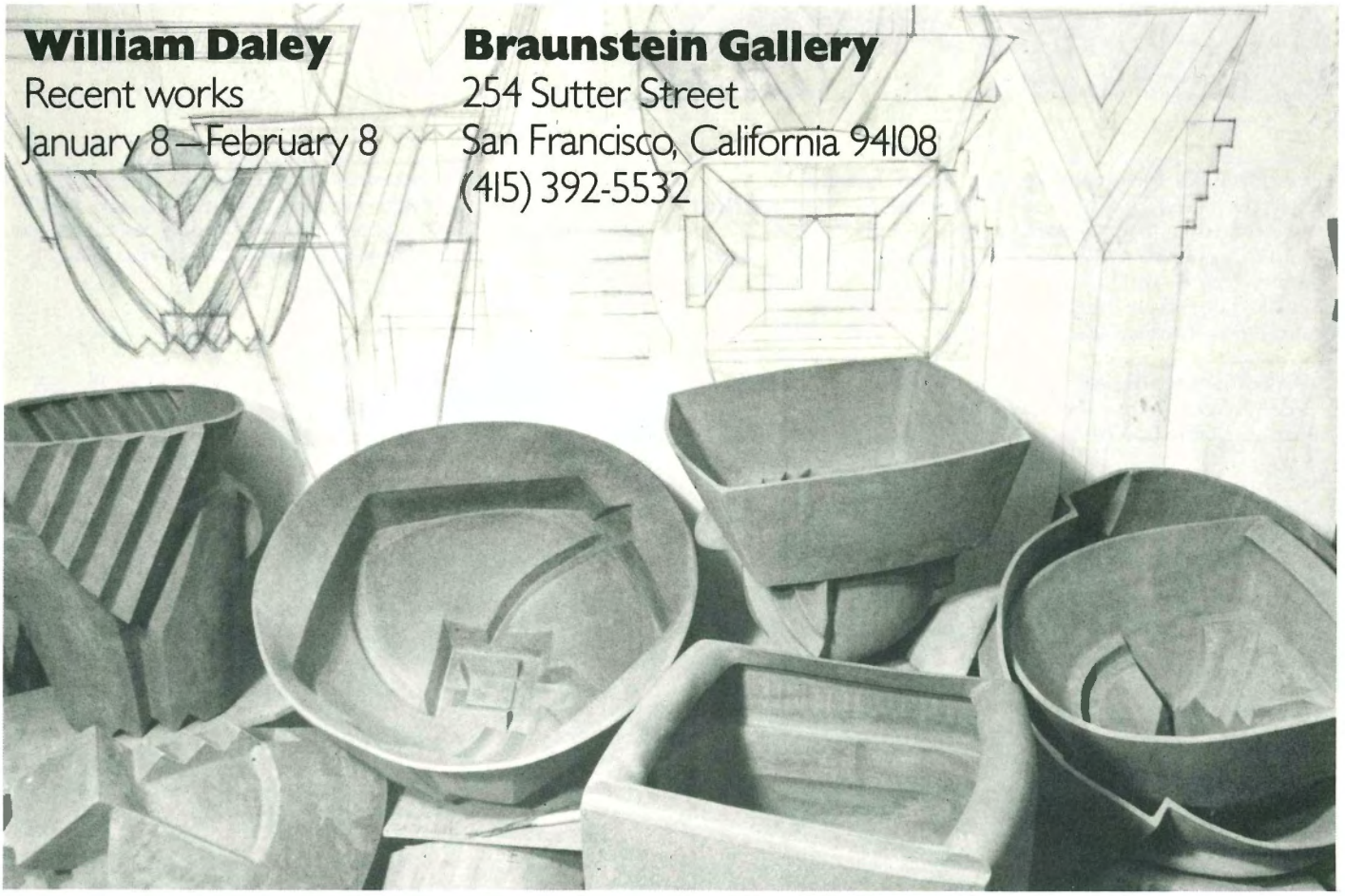

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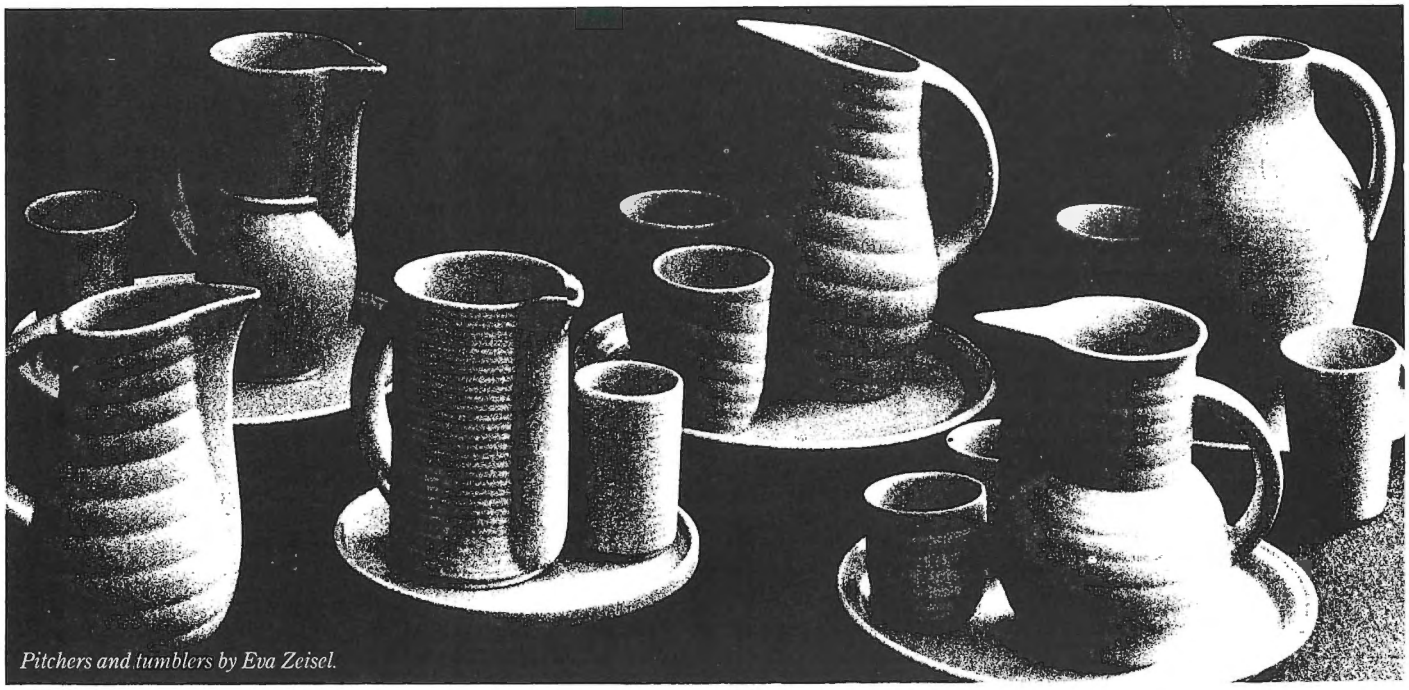
**3/2** Laura Andreson *by Diana Rico/* A Passionate Vision: The Daniel Jacobs Collection *by Michael McTwigan/* Conversation Pieces: The Cups of Irvin Tepper *by Paul Schimmel/* William De Morgan *by Jon Catleugh/* Ted Randall *by Susan Wechsler.*

**3/3** Tall Tales: Ken Little's Portraits of the West *by Ed Forde/* Eva Zeisel: Humanistic Design for Mass Production *by Sarah Bodine/* Toward the Modern Style: Late Rookwood: 1915-1950 *by Ruth Irwin Weidner/* Jun Kaneko *by Lorne Falk/* Henry Varnum Poor *by Edward Lebow.*



*Pitchers and tumblers by Eva Zeisel.*

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(Detail) Tea time (1984), 51″ high, glazed porcelain.

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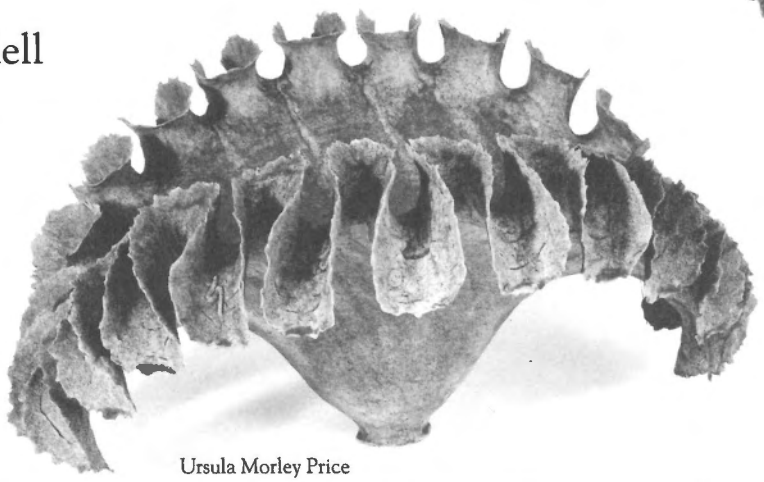

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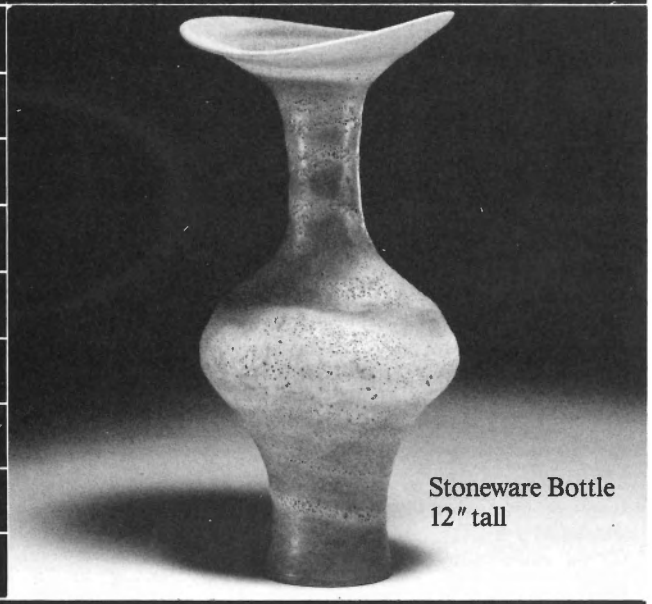

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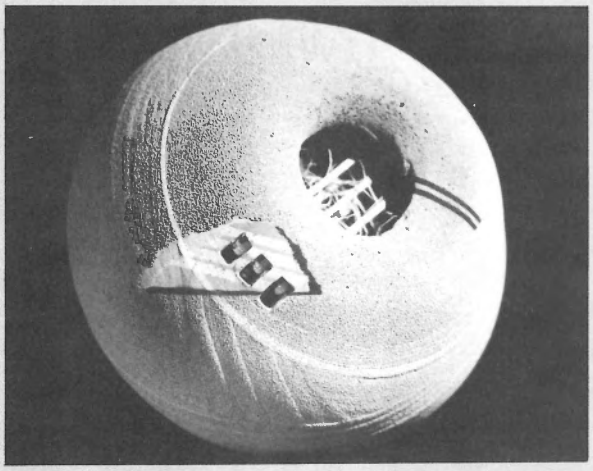

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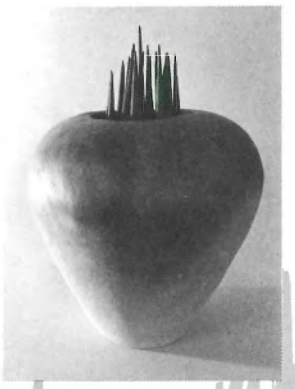

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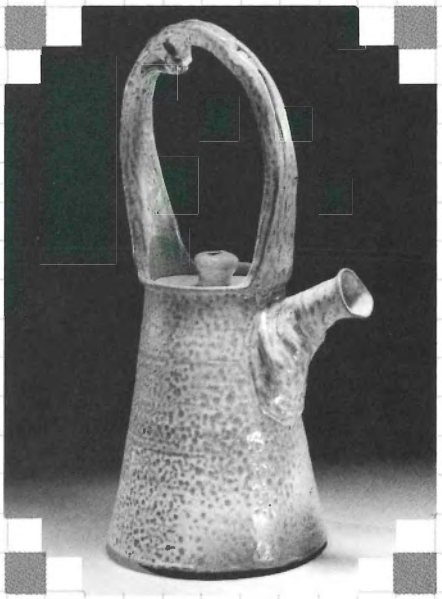

*Teapot (1984), salt-glazed porcelain. Photo by E.G. Schempf*

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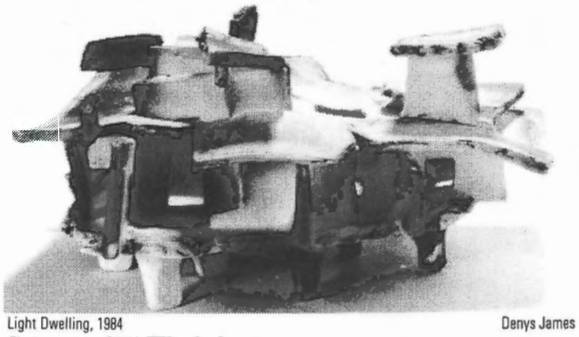

Light Dwelling, 1984 Denys James

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Clay & Glazes
Molds & Models
Ceramic Tiles
Architectural Clay
Entering the Marketplace

**FIBER**
Print Pattern Production
Color & Design in Textiles
Computers in Design
Woven Fabric Design
Crochet/Knitting Design
Machine Knitting

**METAL**
Jewelry Production Techniques
Metal Forming
Enamel on Metal
Hand Engraving
Stone Setting
Gemology

**GLASS**
Glass Technology
Neon
Glassblowing
Cast Glass
Stained Glass

*For more information, call Mary Ann Scherr or Carol Williams at*
**(212) 741-8668**

**Parsons School of Design**
Clay, Fiber, Metal
& Glass Design
2 West 13th Street
New York, N.Y. 10011

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# Clay

## WORKSHOPS

*SUMMER 1985*
*Sun Valley Center for the Arts & Humanities*
*June 17 to August 16*

Resident Artist: Jim Romberg

Visiting Artists: Steve Reynolds
Joe Soldate
Pete Kuentzel
Tom Coleman

For Information Contact:
Ceramics Department
Sun Valley Center
P.O. Box 656
Sun Valley, Idaho 83353
(208) 726-9491
or 622-9371

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Robert Ogata

## The ISOMATA Anagama Workshops

**PAUL CHALEFF**
**CHIRO OTANI**

## Advance Ceramics Workshop

**SUSAN PETERSON**

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# IDYLLWILD SCHOOL OF MUSIC AND THE ARTS

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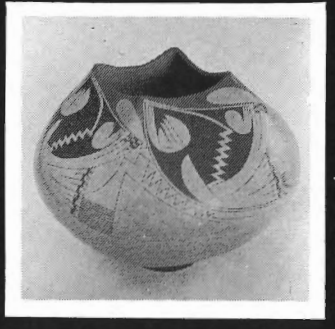
## Native American Pottery Workshops

**LUCY M. LEWIS • ACOMA**
**PRISCILLA NAMPEYO • HOPI**
**BLUE CORN • SAN ILDE FONSO**
**JUAN QUEZADA • CASAS GRANDES**



Juan Quezada

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for Careers in Clay, Fiber, Metal & Glass Design

Consistent with Parsons School of Design's tradition of preparing artists for professional careers, the Department of Clay, Fiber, Metal and Glass Design provides an educational format aimed at career preparation. The curriculum in each medium accommodates both the studio producer and industry-related objectives.

Internship experience, critic/mentor projects, and marketing/business topics are offered in each program. Convenient day and evening classes may be taken for credit or non-credit; BFA and AAS degree programs available.

Courses include:

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Juan Quezada

# Peter Voulkos

January

## Charles Cowles Gallery

Also representing:

Michael Lucero
Ron Nagle

420 West Broadway New York 10012 (212) 925-3500

**William Copley**
***Painting***
January

**Tom Rippon**
***Sculpture***
February

**Sam Hernandez**
***Sculpture***
March

# Quay

254 Sutter Street
San Francisco, California 94108

**William Daley**
***Vessels***
January

**Joel Goode**
***Paintings***
February

**Jeremy Anderson**
***Small Sculpture***
March

# Braunstein

254 Sutter Street
San Francisco, California 94108